UK university lecturers revolt against union sell-out agreement

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An attempt by the University and College Union (UCU) to end the four-week strike by UK lecturers and other university staff, who are fighting savage attacks on their pensions, was thwarted by a rank-and-file rebellion Tuesday.

Thousands protested nationally and hundreds of lecturers demonstrated outside the union's headquarters in London to reject the sell-out deal reached the previous evening. The union was forced to retract the agreement later that day.

The revolt is the latest expression of a resurgence of the class struggle internationally, portending a break with trade unions which function as arms of management. The lecturers' rebellion follows the recent revolt against the unions by 30,000 striking teachers in the US state of West Virginia, who voted to carry on a strike to demand wage increases and an end to soaring health care costs.

After six days of talks under the auspices of the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)—which specialises in ending disputes on the terms of the employers—the UCU and the Universities UK (UUK) employers' body announced an agreement Monday evening, with the aim of suspending the strike Tuesday and stopping all further planned actions.

The agreement set out precisely how the strike would end:

The "UCU have a meeting of their Higher Education Committee (HEC) and their Branch representatives tomorrow 13 March. After that meeting concludes (due early afternoon on Tuesday) UUK expect that UCU will suspend industrial action from and including Wednesday 14 March."

The deal agreed offered no long-term security, being set to last just three years from April 1, 2019, and then giving the employers the right to end the Defined Benefits [DB] scheme as planned. It included a reduction of at least 19 percent in the value of lecturers' pensions.

To maintain a defined benefit pension for only a three-year period, the UCU and management agreed that members' contributions would rise by 1.7 percent, while the employers would increase their share by only 1.3 percent. Both parties would then "engage in meaningful discussions as soon as possible to explore risk sharing alternatives for the future from 2020, in particular Collective Defined Contributions (CDC)."

The threshold for retaining elements of the existing Defined Benefits pension scheme was for those earning £42,000 a year or under. All those earning over that amount would not be entitled to benefits under the existing scheme. The UCU entered the negotiations saying it wanted to maintain a threshold of Defined Benefits at £55,000.

The deal included a pledge by the UCU that it "undertakes to encourage its members to prioritise the rescheduling of teaching in order to minimise the disruption to students." That is, lecturers would be forced to reschedule lectures not undertaken due to the strike.

The union signed the deal shortly after authorising a further 14 days of strike action, exposing this as nothing but an attempt to placate the growing resistance by strikers and to ensure the dispute remained under their control until it could be betrayed.

Within minutes of the deal being announced, anger erupted on social media, with lecturers and students insisting it be thrown out. The hashtag #NoCapitulation went viral. An online "Open letter rejecting the UCU/UUK agreement" noted, "In three years' time we will be demobilised and pressured to accept a worse deal. In our opinion we should keep going and throw

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UUK's offer out all together." Within the space of 24 hours, more than 10,000 had signed.

By 1:00 pm Tuesday, lecturers in ad hoc votes at mass meetings had rejected the deal at 45 universities. Occupations by students took place at a number of universities.

Speaking to a gathering crowd of strikers outside the UCU headquarters in the morning, General Secretary Sally Hunt attempted to sell the rotten deal as the best obtainable. She was constantly interrupted and opposed by lecturers. One denounced Hunt's "strike breakers' charter" and said, "You are now objectively on the side of the employers."

With angry workers and students massed outside, every delegate to the union's Higher Education Committee voted against the agreement—leaving the UCU with no choice but to reject the deal it reached just hours before.

The most pernicious role in attempting to end the strike was played by the UCU Left faction, comprised of representatives of various pseudo-left groups. Among the UCU Left representatives on the union's national executive committee is Socialist Workers Party member Carlo Morelli. The SWP's *Socialist Worker* admitted Tuesday that Morelli "had been part of the [UCU/UUK] negotiations." While trying to palm off parts of the agreement as beneficial, Morelli said, "We shouldn't settle for this deal." Even so, he refused to utter a single word of condemnation of the union.

Just hours earlier, in a posting on its website after the sell-out was announced by the national union, the UCU Left insisted the deal was not a sell-out: "Our negotiators had a gun pointed at their heads. A gun of 'accept this or get DC [Defined Contribution pension]'. A compromise was born. It doesn't necessarily mean negotiators are selling out. This compromise is what happens when you work within the projected deficit and face the threat of 100% DC."

The UCU Left are bitterly opposed to mobilising workers against the treacherous UCU bureaucracy because they are an integral part of it. Even as UCU members were throwing the filthy deal back in the faces of the bureaucracy, the UCU Left claimed that, with the strike, "a new union has been born."

The lecturers' rebellion provides a devastating refutation of the claims by the pseudo-left that they have an ally in Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. His only intervention in the dispute has been to urge talks at ACAS. Throughout yesterday's tumultuous events, Corbyn and the Labour Party, including Shadow Education Minister Angela Rayner, maintained a stony silence. In the struggle they are waging against the UUK and the Conservative government, the lecturers are in a conflict not only against the UCU but against the Labour Party.

The stand taken by lecturers has won broad support among university staff and students precisely because they are seeking to push back against the marketisation of education that has been enforced over decades by both Labour and Tories.

The Socialist Equality Party and its youth organisation, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, were alone in explaining from the beginning of the dispute that the UCU, as with all unions, is not a body that represents the interests of its members. It is a tool of management.

Events have now confirmed without question the necessity of taking the dispute out of the hands of the UCU, turning to the working class, and mobilizing all sections of workers in a common fight for the right to pensions, public education, health care, and a high quality job.

Tuesday's revolt points the way forward. The next step must be the formation of democratically elected rank-and-file committees, *independent of the UCU*, to take control of the strike and all future actions in defence of jobs, wages and conditions, and of higher education. The SEP and the IYSSE will provide every assistance in this struggle.

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