

Striking UK lecturers speak out after rejecting union sell-out deal

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with striking lecturers yesterday in London, Manchester and Sheffield.

In London, where more than 2,000 academics rallied, members of the Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) distributed copies of the statement, “UK university lecturers revolt against union sell-out agreement.”

The article explained that the revolt by lecturers on Tuesday was “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.”

It noted that “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.”

There was universal satisfaction that the University and College Union’s (UCU’s) sell-out deal had been rejected, with lecturers determined to continue the strike to victory. Many questioned the union leadership’s intentions in allowing the deal to get as far as it did.

During a packed meeting at Westminster Central Hall, a staff member from Imperial College London was applauded as he challenged the UCU: “I do have a question for the negotiators, which is ‘What on earth were you thinking?’ For me, and many of my colleagues, we’d all been out on strike, I disappeared for a day and I come back and it’s like a kick in the teeth.

“The reason we had to respond so quickly was because it felt like we were being blackmailed by the UCU leadership. We had 24 hours to respond, and, if not, then we had to capitulate to Universities UK’s demand and go back to work the next day. We also had rescheduling, which is a complete humiliation. What is the point of going on strike if we then have to do all that work for free?

“Rather than patronising us with a discussion of how brilliant we all are, just for a moment can we please put the spotlight on the negotiators. Why did you agree to rescheduling? Why did you—even if we were being defeated which we’re not, we should at least carry out an orderly retreat—we should at least have struck till Friday. What were you thinking?”

UCU President Joanna de Groot responded lamely, “All of your

negotiators with one exception have been elected.” “No deal was ever done,” she falsely claimed.

Outside the meeting hall, our reporters spoke with lecturers and students.

Alison, who works with the Open University, said, “We have spoken today with our feet. We are out here, and none of the branches want to support this kind of offer. We also are vehemently against the idea that staff who have been on strike and who have been penalised for being on strike should then have to give their labour back by rescheduling classes.

“This is a unified struggle of students and lecturers for education. We have to be involved in it now to defend education, to fight against marketisation and fight against casualisation. You’re right, we do need to join up as a united workforce because it’s also about pensions in the wider workforce in the UK.”

Lizzie, who works in Professional Services, said, “I’m in Unison [the largest public sector union], so today is actually my first day striking, because our union is not actually out on strike. I wanted to support the march because of the deal that was proposed yesterday.

“I’m hoping that Unison will ballot its members,” she added.

Khalid, a student from King’s College London (KCL), said he had joined the march “because I think it’s about more than pensions, though pensions would be enough to march for. Privatisation of our universities has led to the point where it’s no longer a place of knowledge creation, it’s about producing knowledge for profit.

“Most classes now are framed around very specialised subjects, like Business Management, for example. Even the sciences are now based more and more—particularly at my university at KCL, with the War Studies department—around weapons manufacture and stuff like that. All without any focus on viable political or economic alternatives, which is what a university is supposed to be for: for producing knowledge for the betterment of society.

“With higher fees for universities, students are no longer able to participate in education. The poor are getting increasingly marginalised with exorbitant fees, especially for international students. This is about more than defending pensions, it’s about saying we want to reclaim our education and our universities.”

Khalid explained how students had organised to help ensure the rejection of the UCU deal: “We called for certain protests in response to the deal, to reject it, to make sure that it didn’t go through. I think today was a very good sign that people are not

accepting the deal.”

Luke was part of a group of students who travelled to London from Essex University: “We’ve been on the picket lines at our campus showing solidarity with staff and trying to engage as many students as possible. We felt it was really important for us to come to London today to show solidarity on the national stage.

“I’m really glad lecturers rejected the deal. ... We have to stay strong and fight for what we need. Not just to get lecturers’ defined pensions, but also to change education for the future. We’ve had doctors come to campus and tell us their struggles with strikes over the past few years. Professors have talked about the miners’ strike and drawn similarities to that. This isn’t just a struggle for education, this is a wider struggle which as many people as possible need to get involved with. One of our banners says, ‘This concerns everyone!’ and I think that’s true.”

At the University of Sheffield, staff manned pickets while students occupied the central arts building. Tim Cooper, an international student support officer and a former lecturer in history and archaeology, said, “The agreement was a sell-out. All it does is delay things for a few more years.

“The thing that people feel most strongly about is the final part of that [UCU] statement—that the union would encourage staff to reschedule lectures. The whole point about a strike is that we are removing our labour, and the last thing you want to do is to give the employers that concession straight away by saying, ‘Right, if we’re ever in this situation again in the future as soon as we go back to work we’ll scramble and work our butts off to replace the work we haven’t been paid for in the first place.’

“This is a bigger debate than just pensions. The student support shows that. This is about the very future of higher education—what it means to be at university, what university teaching means, what students get from it.

“The strikes are now scheduled again for after Easter. At the very least, we need to keep that momentum. People on the pickets were feeling like we’d won victory, and then we saw the statement from our general secretary and we felt that victory had been snatched away from us.

“I’ve worked in UK universities since 1990. This is the most unified I’ve seen staff and students. Arguably—and I go back to my student activist days in the 1970s—in my lifetime this is the closest we’re now getting to real activism on the campuses, and we’ve got to keep that momentum going.

“After the [UCU] statement came out in the evening, it was a case of reading it and thinking ‘I don’t like that,’ then seeing on social media that others were feeling the same, getting to the picket lines early in the morning and finding that people were going ‘Yeah, I’m not happy,’ and within about an hour or two that was turning in some cases to anger, disillusionment—very strong feeling. I didn’t get any negative sense, I got the positive feeling that ‘No, we’re not going to accept this and this fight goes on,’ and this fight clearly isn’t over.”

Social media had played a huge role in the strike, with #NoCapitulation trending on Twitter within hours of the UCU deal being made public. “The main positive difference is not just the speed with which information can get out, but the reality that it gives for building solidarity,” Tim noted. “It’s reminding me how

strong our students are, and the strength of our support.

“If I had doubts at the beginning of this action, it was first of all whether sufficient numbers of our colleagues would be coming out and taking action. Yes, they have, and that has built during the course of the strike. And secondly, we were worried about the students. It has a big impact on them—would they support it? The support has been phenomenal. I’ve been in this sector on and off for 27 years, and I’ve never seen anything like it. We owe a big debt of thanks to our students. Sheffield has been at the forefront. They’ve occupied buildings, and that’s great. We can look forward to real strength, real solidarity between us and our students.”

At the University of Manchester, Marc, a lecturer in the third year of a four-year “probationary” period, said the UUK/UCU deal thrown out by the lecturers, was “a sell-out.”

“There needs to be a mechanism for a no-confidence vote in the union—the head people are staff, employed by the union.”

Originally from Greece, Marc, a reader of the WSWs, said he saw the struggle of UK lecturers as part of an international struggle. “We’re dealing with a transnational economy, so we have to build a sense of solidarity internationally.”

Mickie, a lecturer at Manchester for nine years, said, “It feels hopeful after the wobble. Branch after branch rebelled against the stand of the union leadership.”

Speaking about the “creeping market” in education, he said, “The big one was the crippling student fees in 2011, which led to riots in London. That was a step change. We’ve been subjected to performance management and turned into service providers.

“TEF [Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework] will be used to raise student fees further. You’ll have different fee levels on different courses, according to data on average student earnings after graduation—reducing the value of a course to its market value. This is further commodification.”



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