

UK lecturers resume strike following rebellion against UCU sellout agreement

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15 March 2018

Following the mass revolt by thousands of striking lecturers and other university workers Tuesday—who rejected a sellout agreement reached by the University and College Union (UCU)—they resumed their fight to stop the destruction of their pensions

Around 40,000 lecturers and other academic-related staff who are covered by the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) are involved in the action. Wednesday’s strike was the third of this week’s planned five-day stoppage. This is the fourth successive week that the workers have taken industrial action in what is the largest national strike since that of 50,000 junior doctors in 2016.

Throughout the UK Tuesday, strikers voted in impromptu meetings in at least 45 universities to throw out the UCU’s filthy deal, which detailed how the strike would be immediately ended wholly on the terms of the employers, Universities UK (UUK).

At the University of Manchester, the biggest single university campus in the country, more than 300 voted unanimously to reject the UCU/UUK agreement. At Sheffield University, 350 strikers also voted unanimously in opposition. The same scenario was repeated by thousands of angry staff at universities in Leeds, Newcastle, Glasgow, Cambridge, Cardiff and many other institutions.

Following the rejection of its sell-out deal, the UCU spent yesterday attempting to reassert its control over the dispute. The union staged a march and rally in central London, attended by around 2,000 strikers. The UCU ensured that its general secretary, Sally Hunt, who had recommended the deal and who was heckled and denounced by strikers protesting in their hundreds outside the union’s HQ Tuesday, was nowhere to be seen. After a few speeches at the Malet Street Assembly point, mainly from delegates to the UCU’s

Higher Education Committee, the march made its way to the Westminster Central Hall, where a rally was held.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) distributed copies of the *World Socialist Web Site* article, “UK university lecturers revolt against union sell-out agreement.”

Many lecturers who took the statement expressed satisfaction that the sellout was massively rejected and expressed a determination to continue their struggle to victory.

The UCU could not honestly deal with revulsion at its treachery. An article posted on its web site stated, “UCU has rejected a proposal drawn up at talks between the union and Universities UK (UUK) to end the university pensions strike.” It added, “UCU representatives from the universities where staff are on strike over plans to cut their pensions met at the union’s headquarters today (Tuesday).”

The delegates that the UCU are referring to had no choice but to reject the offer agreed to by their executive, as thousands of angry workers would accept no other outcome, with the UCU’s HQ surrounded by protesters.

In response to the revolt, the UCU will do all it can to end the dispute at the earliest opportunity. Its statement concluded, “We want urgent talks with the universities’ representatives to try and find a way to get this dispute resolved.”

UCU members reacted with such hostility to the sell-out agreement as it would have resulted in a reduction of at least 19 percent in the value of lecturers’ pensions, with tens of thousands of pounds being taken from them in deferred wages. It 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.

To maintain a DB 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 DB pension scheme was for those earning £42,000 a year or less. All those earning more than 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 DB at £55,000. Many lecturers expressed contempt and disbelief that the UCU made a pledge in the Agreement "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 carried out due to the strike, rendering the withdrawal of their labour futile.

By agreeing to a transitional deal till 2022, the UCU had not only agreed to pave the way for the end of DB, but crucially the end all national pensions schemes. This is line with UUK's policy statement that favours "flexible schemes" to meet the needs of individuals and individual universities.

In an August 2017 policy document, "Suitability and Sustainability: pensions in the higher education sector," UUK declared: "More than ever, institutions believe that achieving long-term stability of pension provision is critical and that cost and risk must be better controlled. ..." It stressed, "... *It is evident that uniform pension solutions are no longer suitable for an increasingly divergent higher education sector. Institutions have different strategic priorities, with some wanting more flexibility in the reward package they are able to offer*" [emphasis added].

From the beginning of the dispute, the SEP has insisted that the UCU is not an organisation fighting in the interests of workers. It is a tool of management and, as with all the unions, is not amenable to reform through rank-and-file pressure. The events of the last 48 hours have vindicated this assessment and demonstrate the necessity for workers to break with the

unions and build genuine organisations of class struggle.

We also explained that any claims that the Labour Party represents an ally in the struggle to defend pensions and against marketisation of education must be rejected. Labour, despite the fact it is now led by the nominally "left" Jeremy Corbyn, is the same party that has done so much to attack education in the past, including the introduction of tuition fees and opening up the sector for privatisation.

As lecturers emphatically threw out the UCU's deal on Tuesday, Corbyn did not utter a word in their support. Even 48 hours later, he remains silent, as he will do nothing to jeopardise his relationship with the trade union bureaucracy that he relies upon.

The SEP calls for the formation of democratically elected rank-and-file committees, *independent of the UCU*, as the only means to defend jobs, wages, conditions and the right to a decent pension, as part of the fight for a socialist programme for the defence of education as a right. This struggle can only be successful if it is consciously conducted in opposition to the UCU and the education unions and to the extent that it is bound up with a turn to workers throughout the education sector in Britain and internationally who face the same attacks.



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