

The UK Further Education strike: Lessons of the lecturers' revolt against the University and College Union

The Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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Teaching staff are holding two- or three-day walkouts from today at 12 Further Education (FE) colleges, against a pay offer by the Association of Colleges (AoC) of just 1 percent or £250 “where this is more beneficial.” This is a 3 percent pay cut in real terms and is even less than the 2 percent rise offered to teachers at sixth-form FE colleges.

But strike action is being isolated by the University and College Union (UCU), confined to some London colleges and just one in the Midlands.

The vast majority of the 120,000 full-time equivalent staff, including 60,000 teaching staff, in some 273 FE colleges in England are not involved, despite UCU members at 148 colleges submitting 168 claims for strike action.

The 12 colleges will not even strike on the same days, and 3 of the colleges will strike in isolation from the other 9 for a solitary day on April 18.

The limited stoppages this week follow a two-day strike, now nearly a month ago, on February 28 and March 1, by 1,500 college staff at 15 colleges, also mainly in London. These coincided with the beginning of strikes held over four weeks by lecturers in defence of their pensions. But apart from that single occasion, the UCU has ensured that the lecturers and college workers were never on strike at the same time—under conditions in which a powerful offensive by both, with the enthusiastic support of students, would have closed down much of the higher-education and further-education sectors.

Had the UCU had its way, the university staff strike would have been sold out, with those at colleges left alone to continue with a few token strikes before they too were betrayed.

On March 12, 19 days after the university staff action began, the UCU came to an agreement with Universities UK (UUK)—accepting the bulk of management's attacks. The deal even specified how the strike would be wound up within hours by the UCU, demonstrating the role of the unions as the industrial police force of management.

It was only due to a rank-and-file rebellion by the membership that a sellout was prevented. University staff mobilised throughout the UK in impromptu meetings that rejected the deal, while hundreds surrounded the UCU's headquarters in London.

If their dispute is not to be defeated, College staff must respond in the same way and mount a rebellion against the UCU.

The UCU has done nothing to defend teachers' pay for more than a decade. FE teachers have seen a prolonged squeeze on their wages, equal to a 24 percent cut since 2008. They now earn on average £30,000 a year (take-home pay after tax and National Insurance £23,681) compared with £37,000 a year for teachers in schools.

The low pay in FE stems in large measure from the massive funding cuts that FE colleges, along with the rest of public services and education, have suffered since the Labour government's 2007-2008 £1 trillion bailout of the banks.

Overall income, made up of government, student fees and employers' contributions, has fallen from £7.8 billion in 2009-2010 to £7 billion in 2017-2018, with a reduction in government funding of 27 percent in real terms between 2009 and 2015 and further cuts expected until at least 2020.

By 2016, the cuts had resulted in the loss of 15,000

teaching jobs. FE students now have just 15 hours a week of teaching and support, compared with more than 25 hours in many OECD countries.

The attacks on FE are central to the Conservative government's plans to turn education over to the private sector and replace public expenditure with a "user pays," system of private contributions from students, parents and employers.

All this has been imposed without the education trade unions mobilising any opposition. In 2016, the UCU demobilised a mass movement of tens of thousands of college staff who were demanding action against the AoC's refusal to table any pay rise. It was forced to call a strike in February of that year at 200 colleges. Also striking were members of the largest public-sector union, Unison—the first joint action in colleges for a decade.

Following months of inaction and negotiations, the UCU and the National Union of Students organised a rally in London in November 2016. But this was only a prelude to capitulation, with the UCU accepting the AoC's "final offer" of a 1 percent "pay rise," with a minimum £250 uplift—in reality a substantial pay cut.

As the UCU has accepted the ending of national wage bargaining in FE, even the 1 percent increase was only a "recommendation" that the AoC was not obliged to honour—meaning that local branches had to "request" implementation of the deal. The UCU signed off on the deal, knowing that fewer than one third of colleges had implemented the AoC's pay recommendations from the previous round of negotiations in 2014-2015, with nearly 40 percent of colleges awarding no increase at all.

As a result of their fight against the UCU, the struggle by university staff continues, with a further 14 days of action mooted to take place sometime in May during the exam period. FE and university staff must utilise this situation to take their dispute out of the UCU's hands.

Workers must organise themselves independently, both organisationally and politically. They cannot rely on the UCU, the Trades Union Congress or the Labour Party, whose MPs have done nothing to support striking lecturers and college staff and are spending their time instead seeking to destroy their own leader, Jeremy Corbyn, in alliance with the Tories and the media.

The Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, have initiated an online and call-in forum for lecturers, college staff, other education workers and students to discuss these critical issues on Tuesday, March 27, at 7.30 p.m.

We call for the building of independent rank-and-file committees of education workers and students, in opposition to the UCU and their political apologists in the various pseudo-left groups. Such committees will create the framework for mobilising the entire working class to defend jobs, wages, conditions and the right to high-quality, well-resourced education provision as part of the fight for a socialist reorganisation of economic life.

To participate in the meeting, click here when the meeting begins, or call +44 330 221 0088 and enter access code 900-111-333 . Note, if using your phone from the UK, the number will be billed at the national call rate.

For further information visit:
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