

Vote “No” to University and College Union sellout of UK lecturers pension strike

Robert Stevens
29 March 2018

The Socialist Equality Party calls on lecturers to reject the sell-out pensions offer proposed by the University and College Union (UCU).

The UCU’s Higher Education Committee voted to put the offer to a vote Wednesday in a second attempt to end strike action by lecturers. The ballot is being held by the UCU next week.

UUK are attempting to enforce huge attacks on pensions. In opposition, 40,000 UCU members have taken 14 days of strike action since February 22 in the largest ever strike in Higher Education (HE) in British history. Were UUK to succeed, academics entering the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) today stand to lose more than £200,000 in deferred wages from their retirement income. Many others would lose tens of thousands of pounds.

Had the UCU had its way, the strike would have already been betrayed with its members forced to accept the diktats of management. This was only prevented when, on March 13, thousands of UCU members met in universities nationally and rebelled against the UCU. Hundreds surrounded the UCU London headquarters and demanded the first agreement endorsed by the union the previous evening was repudiated.

The deal would have resulted in the loss by lecturers of an average 19 percent in the value of their pensions, and the maintenance of the current “defined benefits” scheme for just three years, laying the basis to moving to an inferior “defined contributions” system and the ending of a national pension scheme altogether—the stated aim of UUK.

The HEC was forced to reject the deal, but the SEP and Education Fightback warned that the UCU would seek to complete its betrayal. It took under two weeks for the UCU to make its second attempt.

UCU leader Sally Hunt says the union has “worked hard” to gain “concessions... won on the back of the strike action that so many of you have taken.”

What a lie! There are no real concessions.

UUK’s eight-point document states:

- “A formally agreed Joint Expert Panel, comprised of actuarial and academic experts nominated in equal numbers from both sides will be commissioned, to deliver a report.” This will “agree key principles to underpin the future joint approach of UUK and UCU to the valuation of the USS fund.” Hunt hailed the convening of this panel as a “major achievement for UCU,” despite the trustees of the USS being under no obligation to accept its findings!

- The proposal states that current contributions and benefits from the USS, including Defined Benefits, could continue for members, but only for another year--“until at least April 2019.” While noting that “staff highly value Defined Benefit provision,” it states that whereas “the work of the group will reflect the clear wish of staff to have a guaranteed pension *comparable with current provision...*” ***it must meet “the affordability challenges for all parties.” [emphasis added].***

- There is no commitment that employees’ pension contributions will not increase. Instead “The panel will make an assessment of the [USS] valuation. *If in the light of that contributions or benefits need to be adjusted in either direction*, both parties are committed to agree to recommend to the [Joint Negotiating Committee] and the trustee, measures aimed at stabilising the fund to provide a guaranteed pension ***[only] broadly comparable*** with current arrangements.” [emphasis added]

- Point 8 states, “Should this process prove acceptable to all parties this could provide the basis for

the UCU to consult its branches and members on ending the industrial action currently underway within the sector.”

Lecturers throughout the dispute have demanded that there be “no detriment” to their pensions in any agreement reached. UUK’s latest proposal again offers no such protection. In response, in an email sent out to union members by Hunt, she posed the question, “Is it possible to have a no detriment clause [no loss in pension/no increase in contribution] in case the [proposed] independent expert panel’s findings are unhelpful?”

She answered, “[G]iven that no one knows what the independent panel will find my assessment is that it is extremely unlikely that the university employer will go beyond this commitment and agree to a no detriment clause... not least because the current arrangement [as agreed by the UCU] provides that any future contribution increases are shared between the employers and members.”

Prior to Wednesday’s meeting, the UCU did everything possible to bounce members into accepting the offer. But packed UCU branch meetings either rejected the offer or demanded it is revised, with guarantees protecting pensions with no detriment.

Just three branches out of 35 who announced their vote, voted to have the UUK offer put to a ballot of UCU members.

The sabotage by the UCU bureaucracy is only the latest effort to demobilise all opposition to the attacks on its members jobs, wages and conditions.

On Wednesday, members of the UCU at just seven Further Education colleges struck in protest at a derisory one percent or lump sum of £250 pay offer from the Association of Colleges employers. Apart from two days of action, in which strikers at 15 colleges were out at the same time as striking lecturers--no joint action has been organised by the UCU despite members at 148 FE colleges submitting 168 claims for strike action.

Unison, the largest public-sector union, has 50,000 members in the higher education sector and more than 350,000 members among all education staff. It has not yet organised a single strike of its members who are also USS pension members and face the same attacks as members of the UCU. Unison members have voted to reject the proposed move to a defined contribution

scheme by 91 percent in an “internal consultation.” Unison has only now proposed a strike ballot in April, after giving the employers a week’s notice.

The likelihood is that many will vote to strike. This lays the basis for a broader offensive among education workers, providing that the betrayal being organised by the UCU is repudiated.

But as has already been proven, voting against the sell-out deals of the unions is not enough. Before any vote has been held, the UCU is already moving to wind down the lecturers’ strike. The next scheduled round of strike action, to begin April 16, will take place at just 13 universities—a massive reduction from the 65 universities involved previously.

The strikes by lecturers and other education workers must be led by rank and file committees, independent of the UCU. This struggle must be bound up with the mobilisation of 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.

The Socialist Equality Party, Education Fightback and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are holding an online forum for lecturers, college staff, other education workers and students to discuss these critical issues.

Education Fightback forum

No sell-out by the UCU! Form rank and file committees!

Tue, 10 Apr 2018, 19:30--21:30 BST

Please join the meeting from your computer, tablet or smartphone.

<http://bit.ly/efb100418>

You can also dial in using your phone.

United Kingdom: +44 330 221 0088

Access Code: 274-739-237



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact