

Socialist Equality Party (UK) holds online meeting for education workers and students

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (UK) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held an online meeting on the strikes by lecturers and college workers last Tuesday. The Education Fightback forum, titled “No sell-out by the UCU! Form rank and file committees!” was attended by education staff and students from around the country.

IYSSE member Tom Scripps moderated the successful event. Its purpose was to provide a democratic forum to discuss the way forward, Scripps said, especially the need for a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy and the formation of rank-and-file committees.

There was a particularly warm welcome given to *World Socialist Web Site* US Labour Editor, Jerry White, who spoke on the significance of the nine-day strike by 30,000 West Virginia teachers that ended earlier this month.

Robert Stevens, WSWs UK editor, opened the meeting by placing the UK and US strikes in the context of a developing strike wave internationally. This has included action by education workers in India, major strikes and protests in Tunisia, Iran, Germany and Greece, and mass demonstrations in France against the attacks on the jobs and conditions and the privatisation agenda of the Macron government.

The previous weekend had seen hundreds of thousands of school students in the US demonstrate against the endemic violence in schools and society more generally.

Stevens stressed that it was “critical to draw the lessons of workers in struggle internationally.” The action by West Virginia teachers had been initiated by education staff themselves, against the inaction of their trade union leaders. When the WVEA and AFT-WV trade unions reluctantly called a limited statewide strike, it was only in order to try to quickly corral the movement behind a sell-out deal with Governor Jim Justice.

The teachers had rejected these moves and began organising meetings on the picket lines and online, in

defiance of threats by management and their own union. Without a means of continuing their rebellion, however, Stevens explained that the unions were able to sell out the teachers a few days later by essentially repackaging the same deal they had rejected. The unions rammed it through without allowing teachers an opportunity to discuss it and have a vote on a return to work.

“What happened in the US closely resembles events in the UK lecturers strike that took place just days after,” Stevens explained. “In the same way that the West Virginia teachers took it upon themselves to stop the sellout by the unions, lecturers here were forced to intervene and ensure their strike wasn’t ended with a rotten sellout deal.

“The SEP was alone in warning lecturers and other workers about the role of the unions and what the UCU would attempt to do,” he said. It had published a statement that it circulated amongst university staff titled, “UK lecturers dispute: Lessons from the West Virginia teachers strike.”

It included the prescient warning, “In their revolt against the unions, the West Virginia teachers point the way forward. Left in the hands of the union bureaucracy, the UK lecturers strike will go down in defeat, with disastrous consequences for this and future generations of workers. To win demands, the formation of new fighting organisations that are independent of the unions are required.”

This warning was vindicated just days later when the UCU and the Universities UK (UUK) employers’ body announced a sellout agreement on March 12. When it became clear how bad the deal was, university staff organised meetings and marched in their hundreds, surrounding the UCU’s headquarters in London to insist that the deal was rejected.

“This was a very important step and prevented the UCU from ending the strike on the employers’ terms,” Stevens

said. “But, as was demonstrated in West Virginia, rejection will not by itself prevent the UCU from trying to impose a similar, repackaged deal in the days ahead.

“What the strikes in the US and here demonstrate is that workers have to unite their struggles organisationally and politically independent of the trade unions.

“The unions are not organisations that fight in the interests of the working class. They are agencies of the corporations, of management and the state. They exist to defend capitalism and police the working class.”

Nor could any reliance be placed in Labour under Jeremy Corbyn, he continued. Not only had Labour pioneered many of the attacks on education now being extended by the Tory government, it is implementing Tory cuts in local authorities nationwide.

Labour “remains a party of big business now that it is headed by Jeremy Corbyn,” Stevens said, noting that the Labour leader’s only intervention in the lecturers’ dispute had been to urge talks with management—the same talks that had resulted in the sellout deal.

The struggle by education staff was as its root “a fight against capitalism. It is ultimately about which class controls the allocation of resources in society and who makes the decisions on these issues,” Stevens concluded.

White emphasised the international character of the struggles of educators: “Ten years after the global financial crash governments are continuing relentless austerity after spending trillions on bank bailouts, corporate tax cuts and war.”

Teachers in West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma and other states have starting wages of \$31,000 (£22,000). “Many have accumulated thousands in student loan debt, have to work two jobs, or rely on food stamps to feed their families,” he said. After years of being betrayed by the unions, they have organized Facebook groups and pressed for statewide strikes. The SEP, White said, has encouraged workers to break decisively from the unions, by building rank-and-file committees, in order to mobilise the entire working class against both big business parties and the corporate and financial elite that want to destroy public education.

Teachers throughout the world, he said, were deeply committed to the egalitarian principles embodied in public education, which the great American revolutionary Thomas Jefferson said was the only means to prevent the return of the tyranny and oppression of “Kings, priests and nobles.” Today, White said, “the modern-day Kings, priests and nobles, that is the billionaire capitalists, do not want an enlightened population but ignorant slave to

exploit and send off to war. That is why it is left to the working class to defend the right to high quality public education, and why this is only possible through a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth and power of the capitalist class.”

Amongst those commenting in the discussion was a university lecturer who explained that the UCU’s efforts to sellout the lecturers strike over pensions would not only impact on older staff, who stand to lose up to £200,000 apiece, but would end the right to a decent pension for the younger generation. “This is in line with the employers’ desire for pensions ‘flexibility’ to suit the needs of individual universities as they gear up for increased marketisation, and competition for students in an international marketplace”, she said.

In Further Education, the situation was even worse. The UCU’s acceptance of a 1 percent pay deal, which many colleges did not even implement. “Now, it is preparing another sell out deal and urging their members to start local negotiations, in effect ending national bargaining.”

The meeting heard from another lecturer on the extent of casualisation in education, as shown in his 20-year experience in higher education teaching. The result was that he now earned less today than when he first started.

An especially moving contribution was made by a Special Educational Needs teacher in the south of England. Her remarks underscored White’s comments on how the 2008 financial crisis had been seized on by the ruling elites across the world to attack education. The result had been a disaster, especially for the most vulnerable children, she explained.

The meeting agreed to hold another online Education Fightback forum to take forward the discussion and help prepare the formation of rank-and-file committees on Tuesday, April 10. Full details are below.

Education Fightback forum

Tuesday April 10 at 7.30 p.m.

To participate in the meeting, visit bit.ly/efb100418 when the meeting begins, or call +44 330 221 0088 and enter access code 274-739-237.

If using your phone from the UK, you will be billed at the national call rate.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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