

University and College Union sells out UK lecturers strike

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The struggle by around 50,000 lecturers, librarians, administration staff and technicians to defend their pensions and conditions has been betrayed by the University and College Union (UCU).

Last Friday, the union leadership achieved its desired goal. After 14 days of strikes—which the UCU, in collaboration with management, had sought to close down—members voted to accept an offer from the Universities UK (UUK) by a 64 percent to 36 percent majority.

UCU leader Sally Hunt hailed the result as a “clear majority” in favour of the proposals. In reality, despite the UCU’s incessant pressure on members to accept the offer over the nine-day balloting period, more than a third of the 33,973 who voted rejected the deal.

In addition, almost 20,000 (19,442) did not vote at all. This means that 31,672 members out of a potential 53,415, have not endorsed the deal—fully 59.2 percent of those balloted.

Nonetheless, in the absence of a political alternative to the trade union leaders, the bureaucracy has been able to shut down the action.

The strike was the largest ever held at higher education institutions in the UK, with workers at 65 universities striking to oppose the decimation of their pensions.

Under UUK proposals some members of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) were set to lose more than £200,000 of their retirement income, and many others, tens of thousands of pounds. The ultimate aim of UUK, as stated in their August 2017 policy document, is to end a national pension scheme altogether in favour of “flexible schemes.”

The UCU leadership claims to have extracted concessions from UUK but this is a lie. Management has only committed to convening a “Joint Expert Panel, comprised of actuarial and academic experts nominated in equal numbers from both sides.” This will “deliver a

report” on the valuation of the USS.

Further proposals will be made that will invariably fall far below staff demands, given that the USS trustees and the pension regulators are not obliged to accept the outcome.

The proposal states that current contributions and benefits from the USS, including Defined Benefits (DB), could continue for members, but only for another year—“until at least April 2019.” After that, management will be able to put in place mechanisms to end the DB system and move to an inferior Defined Contributions plan.

That is why management—with the backing of the UCU—refused to include a “No Detriment” clause in the eight-point offer supposedly guaranteeing that USS members will not suffer further pension cuts.

The UCU Higher Education Committee played the key role in getting the offer through by suspending the strikes after 14 days of action and referring it to an e-ballot. This was aimed at isolating staff, who were then subject to a battery of UCU propaganda insisting no better offer would be forthcoming.

This was essential under conditions in which there was widespread opposition to the proposed deal from UCU branches that had met and discussed the offer. Several branches passed motions of no confidence in Hunt’s leadership.

UCU strikers had already rejected the first shoddy deal the union agreed with UUK on March 12, which 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.

The following day thousands of UCU members met in universities nationally and rebelled against the UCU. Hundreds surrounded the UCU’s London headquarters and demanded the agreement endorsed by the union the

previous evening be repudiated.

It was to demobilise this opposition that, before the ballot period had even begun, the UCU reduced the number of universities scheduled to be involved in strike action this week from 65 to 13.

The closing down of the strike is an indictment of the UCU Left, which functions as the political appendage of the bureaucracy.

The UCU Left comprises various pseudo-left organisations—who have members on the union’s leading bodies—most prominently the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Having refused to wage a struggle against the efforts of the union tops to sabotage the action, the UCU Left now seeks to persuade workers that the union is a fighting organisation that requires only a few cosmetic changes at the top.

A UCU Left statement, issued as the e-ballot closed on April 13, hailed a growth in membership during the strike, which “produced a transformation in our union in just a matter of weeks, creating a broad layer of new activists and leaders throughout our union.”

The problem, however, is that workers had been recruited into an organisation preparing to sell them out. And the pseudo-left—rather than utilising this recruitment to mount a rebellion against the bureaucracy—was politically disarming workers in the face of these preparations. A subsequent statement issued April 13, after the Yes vote was confirmed, accepted that the union bureaucracy remains in control of pension negotiations, even while admitting that pension cuts were the only likely outcome.

“The union now has a complicated dual task: keeping up the pressure for the best outcome from the Independent Expert Panel,” the UCU Left wrote, “and, at the same time, maintaining our organisation so that if the outcome is a pension cut—as is likely—we are able to ballot for industrial action and carry it out effectively.”

After making, in its initial April 13 statement, a few token criticisms of an e-ballot that exposed “a deep democratic deficit in our trade union,” the UCU Left declared, “[W]e need democratic structures and a democratic culture that properly reflects our transformed union.”

As for Hunt, the UCU Left declared in its statement following the Yes vote, “We have no desire to personalise the issue but she must publicly affirm that [future] negotiations must go through the proper channels. And if she is not prepared to carry out UCU policy then she should stand down altogether.”

The SWP similarly declared in the run-up to the ballot result that “the strikes have created a stronger, more dynamic union,” insisting that all that is required is the refurbishing of a “transformed,” “fighting” union. The truth is that the UCU’s sell-out is not the result of deficient “structures” or a “culture,” just as Hunt’s actions are not simply a matter of her personality.

They flow organically from the nature of the trade unions themselves, which function as industrial policemen on behalf of the government and employers. Their ability to increase the exploitation of their members—through declining wages, the erosion of pensions and other social rights—therefore depends on the suppression of the democratic rights of the rank-and-file.

That is why the defence of workers jobs, conditions and living standards cannot be entrusted to the unions.

The pseudo-left seeks to conceal this fact because they speak for privileged middle-class layers, hostile to the political independence of the working class, and function as factions of the Labour Party and union apparatus.

Throughout the dispute the Socialist Equality Party and its Education FightBack campaign sought to arm workers with an understanding of the unions and the political context in which their struggle was unfolding—an ever-deepening crisis of global capitalism that was the source of austerity and war.

Only the building of new rank-and-file and workplace committees that reject the subordination of the working class to the capitalist profit system and which make the defence of the social needs of all workers the axis of their struggle can show the way forward.

This requires the adoption of a new, socialist perspective and the building of a genuinely socialist party—the Socialist Equality Party.



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