

UK: University and College Union seeks to demobilise pay dispute

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The University and College Union (UCU) is working to derail a struggle by its members for better pay. This follows a sellout agreement earlier this year, in which further attacks on pension rights were imposed by the union bureaucracy.

On October 18, the UCU was forced to hold a recalled conference after May's three-day annual Congress was forced to close early when general secretary Sally Hunt, and supporters in the Unite union, staged three walk-outs. Her intention was to prevent discussion on resolutions demanding the UCU leadership be held to account for shutting down the 14-day pensions strike by 50,000 academic staff to impose a sell-out deal.

The UCU had attempted to end the strike in March, but met with opposition from thousands of lecturers around the country to their proposed deal. Having piled incessant pressure on its members, the strike was ended in April on what was essentially a repackaging of the same deal. A third of UCU members rejected it, with almost 20,000 refusing to vote at all.

The pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP) both rushed to the defence of the Hunt leadership. At the recalled Congress, their efforts were focused on insisting on the need to look forward to a UCU campaign for a strike ballot in pursuit of increased pay being fought for by a "rejuvenated union."

Hunt, who had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, did not attend the recalled event. The *World Socialist Web Site* predicted that her illness and absence would be utilized to block all efforts to hold the leadership to account. This was the case, as the UCU's Exeter branch withdrew a no confidence motion, stating it was inappropriate given the general secretary's poor health.

Another motion, submitted by King's College London UCU, called for Hunt's censure for her conduct during the strike. It was proposed and debated and overwhelmingly passed by delegates, but the executive responded by acknowledging minor errors while claiming it was more important for the union to "come together" than to pass a motion.

Neither motion was supported by the UCU Left, who are opposed to any break by workers with the UCU and will do nothing to threaten the domination of the right-wing who control the union.

To cover for the betrayals of Hunt, et al, the SP even referred to the pension strike as a "dramatic success" and "magnificent." The strike had "taught many activists valuable lessons about how a dispute can be fought," they claimed.

Reporting on the recalled congress, the SP left no doubt as to where their sympathies lie, sending "solidarity to Sally at this difficult time."

That there was to be no fight to hold the perpetrators of the betrayal to account was made clear by leading SWP and UCU Left representative, Carlo Morelli. He declared, "There are a variety of views on the left about how to respond [at the recalled Congress]. But whatever happens with the motions, it's important that we have a united left to fight over pay and pensions." Morelli knew full well the pensions dispute had been sold out. The pay fight was a reference to a ballot in August of UCU members at 147 institutions who were asked by the union to reject a final pay offer from the employers of 2 percent, or £425 per year.

This fell far short of the rate of inflation, with the Retail Price Index then at 3.4 percent, and did nothing to address a huge real-terms cut in pay suffered by lecturers, administrators, technicians, caretakers and cleaners. The union estimates that a 21 percent pay

increase is needed just to recover lost pay since 2010.

Under the Trade Union Act 2016, which came into force last year, for a strike to be legal 50 percent or more of union members in a workplace must cast a vote in the ballot—with the majority of those voting supporting industrial action. When the ballot result was finally released by the UCU, on October 22, members in only a few institutions had voted at a turnout rate of 50 percent or above. Total turnout was just 42 percent, with only six institutions in Higher Education passing the 50 percent threshold. In Further Education, only four colleges reached the threshold.

The response of the pseudo-left was to go into overdrive to defend the UCU, under conditions in which the low turnout was clearly a vote of no confidence in the union leadership. The SP declared that the 72 percent (of 42 percent of UCU members balloted) supporting industrial action represented “a huge achievement.” What was now required was to put the past behind us and exert all efforts on defending and building up the UCU.

The SP’s Sam Morecroft wrote on October 31, “This has been a year of building our union, with successful local disputes and the incredible 14-day pension strike. The Tories’ anti-union laws have frustrated us for now. But we are determined to smash their undemocratic thresholds and to fight to defend post-16 education from austerity.”

For all their militant posturing, “smashing” the “undemocratic thresholds” means nothing so long as there is no fight to take control out of the hands of the union bureaucracy which insists that the anti-union laws are obeyed. The UCU Left instead launched a campaign “to re-ballot branches that had a turnout of 35% or more this pay round... to increase the turnout in a re-ballot. If at first you don’t succeed, try, try and try again!”

On November 7, a special sector conference on pay agreed to re-ballot UCU education members. The new ballot would “involve all branches but this time on an aggregate basis (all results counted together).”

This new ballot was put back months, with the UCU reporting that it would “take place in the new year and no later than March 2019.” In the event, it was decided to open the ballot on January 14, 2019 and close it over a month later, on February 22.

The UCU are past masters at isolating and

demobilising struggles over pay and job losses. The union finally authorized a token pay strike at the end of November—at just six institutions that passed the 50 percent threshold.

This latest debacle confirms the impossibility of reforming organisations that function as arms of management. Education workers must turn to the building of new rank and file organisations of struggle, independent of the trade unions and armed with a socialist programme. Such a turn will proceed only in the face of bitter opposition from the pseudo-left groups.



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