

UK lecturers and academic staff ballot to strike against huge pension and pay cuts

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Strike ballots involving more than 120,000 lecturers, academics and other staff at 147 UK universities nationwide are under way.

Over 52,000 staff at 69 universities are balloting in their ongoing fight against attacks by the employers' body, Universities UK (UUK), on their pensions. Further tens of thousands of academic staff are also being balloted at all 147 academic institutions over pay, workload, equality, and job security. The ballots run until the end of October.

The ballots are part of a resurgence of the class struggle internationally. More than 100,000 UK postal workers are also balloting over the same period for industrial action. Educators all over the world, from the US to Australia, have participated in protracted struggles this year in defence of their livelihoods and public education. And in the US, 46,000 GM autoworkers have been on strike since midnight Sunday while 80,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers have a strike date set for October 14.

On the eve of the ballot, the University and College Union (UCU) published research showing that its members would be nearly £240,000 worse off on average under new pensions arrangements.

The UCU study compared a real-life member of university staff, who joined the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension plan in 2011 and is affected by the reforms, with a hypothetical member, who joined at the same time, but who has not been affected by any of the changes made since then.

The analysis shows that a typical member of the USS would pay around £40,000 more into their pension during their working life but would receive almost £200,000 less in retirement, as a result of the changes introduced since 2011.

Changes to the pension scheme over the last eight years—including increasing contribution levels from 6.35 percent of salary in 2011 to the current rate of 8.8 percent and rising to 9.6 percent from October this year, the closure of the final salary element and a restriction on defined benefits—have decimated USS members' pension packages, leading to vastly increased costs and reduced payouts in

retirement.

Further increases in pension contributions to roughly 11 percent of salary are planned by 2021.

This latest research and ballot follow 14 days of industrial action undertaken by 50,000 academic staff last year, to defend their pensions and working conditions. The strike was the largest ever held in the UK's higher education institutions, with workers at 65 universities bringing campuses across the country to a standstill.

The UCU leadership, in collaboration with UUK, sought to shut down the industrial action from the outset. On March 12, after nine days of strikes, UCU and UUK reached a sell-out agreement that would have resulted in the loss by lecturers of an average 19 percent in the value of their pensions.

A mass rebellion broke out among lecturers in opposition to this, and the following day thousands of UCU members met in universities nationally to oppose the sell-out deal being proposed. Hundreds surrounded UCU's London headquarters and demanded that the agreement endorsed by the union be repudiated, leaving the UCU leadership with no choice but to reject the rotten deal it had agreed just hours earlier.

However, determined to complete its betrayal, just two weeks later UCU proposed a second shoddy deal that it eventually rammed through on April 13. This was carried out with the backing of the UCU Left comprising the members of various pseudo-left outfits, including the Socialist Workers Party. UCU members voted reluctantly to accept the UUK deal by a 64 percent to 36 percent majority. In an indication of members' hostility to the deal, 31,672 members out of a potential 53,415 did not endorse the deal—either by rejecting it or not voting—fully 59.2 percent of those eligible to vote.

The UCU leadership claimed to have extracted concessions from UUK, but the deal left strikers in virtually the same position as they had started. Management only committed to convening a "Joint Expert Panel" (JEP), comprised of actuarial and academic experts nominated in

equal numbers from both sides, to “deliver a report” on the valuation of the USS.

The JEP released its report in September 2018, which suggested only a few minor cosmetic alterations to the pension plan to ensure “fairness” and adopt a more “consistent” approach to pensions valuations.

The UCU applauded the publication of the report, with then-General Secretary Sally Hunt hailing the “independent assessment” as a “significant landmark in our ongoing campaign to defend members’ pensions.” It was nothing of the sort. The convening of the JEP was a cynical manoeuvre aimed at reining in the militancy of university workers determined to fight to protect their pensions, while ultimately handing further concessions to UUK.

UCU members are already reaping the bitter fruits of the union’s betrayals. In April of this year, as the one-year freeze agreed by UCU expired, members’ contributions were immediately increased from 8 percent to their current level of 8.8 percent, following the imposition of a cost-sharing rule by USS, with further increases planned.

After the new increases, UCU threatened further strikes if pensions contributions were not capped at an already high maximum of 8 percent of salary and a “no detriment” requirement was not accepted. In July, when UUK came back with an offer to limit staff contributions to 9.1 percent of salary in exchange for UCU agreeing to a two-year strike ban, UCU rejected the offer, triggering the strike ballot.

The union’s refusal to accept the employer’s deal and decision to call the ballot was not out of any enthusiasm for a struggle to defend the pensions and working conditions of their members.

With last year’s unprecedented strike, and the huge rebellion against the UCU leadership fresh in their memory, the trade union bureaucrats are desperate to ensure that any action by university staff to protect their pensions is carried out within safe, official channels.

The UCU bureaucracy are navigating a volatile situation. After years of attacks on their members’ retirement funds by the employers, and last year’s capitulation at the forefront of their members’ minds—the UCU leadership know that being seen to too eagerly acquiesce to UUK’s demands could result in another all-out rebellion by lecturers and other university staff.

That there is to be no genuine fight to secure the decent pensions and working conditions of their members is made clear by UCU’s refusal to call joint strike action with university workers involved in a second industrial dispute—over pay, workload, equality, and job security.

University workers at 147 UK higher education institutions will be balloted simultaneously with the pensions’ vote, with the result in late October. Opposed to

calling out all their members across the country in a powerful common offensive to defend pay, working rights *and* pensions across further and higher education, the UCU is putting up every mechanism to isolate balloting university workers from each other and keep any eventual strike activity as limited and ineffectual as possible.

Seeking to frame the two struggles as unconnected and isolated issues, UCU is issuing two separate strike ballots to members. Workers at the 69 institutions where the union has registered a pensions dispute will receive two ballot papers, while workers at all the other universities will only receive the one.

Making explicit UCU’s desire to isolate and demobilise the lecturers’ fight, General Secretary Jo Grady—who was elected in May after former union chief Sally Hunt stepped down in the wake of last year’s rebellion—rejected any notion that the two disputes meant more industrial action would be required.

“UCU has the capacity to manage two campaigns,” she stated in a message to members. “The fact that we are balloting simultaneously does not mean that we need to take twice as much action as we did for USS.”

In fact, Grady declared that they can stymie any strike activity for months after. “After the ballots close, we have a six-month window within which to schedule any strikes, so we can be flexible in terms of the timing and amount of action we take.”

What this “flexibility” means is that any action that may be called by the UCU bureaucrats will be curtailed and isolated from the beginning—with any strikes they are forced to call unlikely to be scheduled on the same days, and with individual days of industrial action spread out over weeks and months.

University workers must take heed. The UCU has demonstrated time and again its hostility to any genuine struggle to secure working conditions and pensions. The UCU’s record and Grady’s statements confirm the impossibility of taking up a successful struggle led by this moribund organisation that functions—as do all the unions—as an adjunct of management.

Education workers must immediately turn to the urgent task of building new and democratic rank-and-file organisations, independent of the trade unions, and armed with a socialist programme.



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