

UK: Tens of thousands of university and college staff vote to strike

Ballot follows strike votes by postal workers, railway conductors, airline pilots, NHS staff

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The announcement October 31 of the result of ballots conducted by the University and College Union (UCU) reveals the determination of academic staff to fight the decimation of their pay, conditions and pensions.

In the ballot at 147 higher education institutions over proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension, 79 percent of those voting supported strikes. In the ballot on pay, casualisation, equality and workloads, the result was 74 percent.

Under anti-trade union legislation, a 50 percent turnout must be met for industrial action to proceed. In the ballot on pensions, 41 university UCU branches met the threshold. For the ballot on pay and conditions, 52 branches met the threshold. Overall, tens of thousands of staff at dozens of universities and colleges are prepared to strike, covering over a million students.

The UCU vote follows a series of ballots in which workers have voted to strike by large majorities. On October 15, more than 110,000 postal workers balloted by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) at Royal Mail Group (RMG) and Parcelforce supported industrial action almost unanimously. For RMG the majority was 97 percent and for Parcelforce 95 percent. Postal workers are opposing plans to impose part-time, short-term and zero hours contracts, with tens of thousands of jobs threatened as part of RMG's restructuring plans.

In the last weeks, railway conductors at two private rail franchises have voted to strike. West Midland Trains (WMT) returned an 89 percent majority on a turnout of 79 percent in opposition to a move to Driver Only Operated trains (DOO). This is aimed at the eventual elimination of the conductor grade with thousands of job losses.

Merseyrail guards voted by 81 percent to fight the DOO plans with strikes back in 2017. Last month, just four days

after announcing them, the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union called off a series of planned stoppages at Merseyrail, due to take place in November and December.

Workers at the Virgin West Coast rail franchise are to strike on November 19 for 24 hours in a dispute over the alleged victimisation of a colleague. This follows weeks in which workers have refused to do overtime.

The *Sun* reported this week that the British Airline Pilots' Association is preparing to call off its pay dispute with British Airways after threatening up to 10 days of strikes over the Christmas period.

Other workers who have voted to strike include hundreds of non-medical National Health Service staff in Berkshire and Surrey fighting the privatisation of their jobs, 100 drivers, draymen and warehouse staff at Tradeteam drinks distributor in a dispute over pay; eCourier drivers and riders who provide same-day delivery services in London struck on October 10 demanding improved pay and employment rights.

The spate of strikes and strike votes in Britain is part of a worldwide resurgence of the class struggle. Workers in country after country, in one globally integrated industry after another, are fighting back against the insatiable demands of the employers, financial markets and hedge funds.

However, the response of the trade union bureaucracy to these votes is either to refuse point blank to call any action, or to make desperate appeals to the employers to return to negotiations.

The CWU set no date for any industrial action, saying, "Let's be clear, we want a negotiated settlement." At a rally announcing the ballot result in London, CWU General Secretary Dave Ward told the assembled postal workers, "We're going to come out and speak to

individual shareholders and explain to them ... that [we] can make this company very successful.”

The UCU leadership made clear even while the ballot was taking place that it was opposed to any struggle. UCU General Secretary Jo Grady’s first response to the results was, “Universities now have to come back to us prepared to work seriously to address these problems.”

The union insisted from the outset that the issues of pensions and that of pay and conditions were separate, hence the holding of the two ballots. Moreover, members should not expect any joint action to be held of those workers being balloted. In a message to UCU members in September at the launch of the ballots, Grady stated, “UCU has the capacity to manage two campaigns. The fact that we are balloting simultaneously does not mean that we need to take twice as much action as we did for USS [a reference to the 2018 pensions dispute].”

Grady warned, “After the ballot closes, we have a six-month window within which to schedule any strikes, so we can be flexible in terms of the timing and the amount of action we take.”

The UCU knows that the ballots are indicative of the growing anger and determination to fight by its members. Last year’s action by 50,000 UCU members to defend their pension provision was the largest ever in the UK by university staff. Following nine days of strikes, the UCU reached a sell-out agreement with Universities UK (UUK) leaving staff set to lose around 19 percent of the value of their pensions. This was met with a mass rebellion of the membership and hundreds surrounded the UCU headquarters demanding a rejection of the deal.

Under pressure, the UCU leadership backtracked and pulled out of the deal. But the bureaucracy regrouped and came back with a second proposal it was able to impose with the support of pseudo-left representatives in the UCU Left, including the Socialist Workers Party.

The UCU claimed UUK had made concessions, yet the deal gave essentially what the employers had been seeking. Management agreed to the setting up of a Joint Expert Panel (JEP) made up of union and management representatives to report on the valuation of the USS. The JEP delivered its report in September last year, suggesting only a few minor cosmetic changes to make it appear fairer.

A freeze agreed on raising the employees’ contribution from 8 percent to 8.8 percent ran out in April this year and the higher rate was applied. In August, the USS announced it wanted to raise the contributions made by university staff to 9.6 percent of their salaries, to be

increased again in 2021.

Research by the UCU shows that the value of members pay has fallen by 21 percent in real terms over the last decade. A *Guardian* article October 29 noted, “According to 2016 research from the union (UCU), more than half of all academics are on temporary contracts.”

Aware of the groundswell of anger, this situation forced the UCU to trigger the strike ballots.

The record turnouts by hundreds of thousands of workers for industrial action and their determination to win protracted disputes—such as those by rail and airline workers—reveal the extent to which Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn has worked with the trade union bureaucracy to suppress a social explosion for the last four years. Corbyn has never made a single appeal to Labour’s 500,000 members and to workers in general, to wage an industrial offensive. Instead he has stuck with his mantra that all struggles be ended by “negotiations.”

The potential eruption of strikes during the general election campaign will fill Corbyn et al. with dread. The last thing they want is for workers to move into struggle when they are desperately trying to convince the City of London that Labour can be trusted to form a government—with Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell already mounting his latest “tea and biscuits” courtship of the banks and corporations.

The pro-Labour *New Statesman* cited two anonymous shadow cabinet members on the threatened postal strike possibly impacting on Labour’s election campaign, “It’s not ideal,” said one, while the other added, “I am hoping they call that strike off, to be honest with you. It is the last thing we need. And I’ll be telling them so.”



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