

Socialist Equality Party campaign team attends University College London strike of outsourced workers

Thomas Scripps
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Cleaners, porters, and security staff staged a one-day strike at University College London (UCL) Tuesday. Workers were striking against hyper-exploitative outsourcing practices and for parity of pay and conditions with their in-house co-workers. The action, organised by the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB), was the largest ever strike of outsourced workers in higher education, with some 300 people taking part.

Thomas Scripps, who is standing as the Socialist Equality Party's candidate in the general election in the Holborn and St Pancras constituency where UCL is located, intervened in support of the struggle of the outsourced workers. Click here for a video of Scripps speaking on the issues involved in the strike.

After a three-hour picket outside UCL's main delivery entrance, the strikers, joined by many students and academic staff, occupied the University's student centre for a rally, with speeches delivered in English and Spanish. People carried signs reading "Pay rise now", "Pension equality now", "Shame on UCL", "Unequal College London" and "Cleaners, porters and security: back in house" and chanted "UCL, shame on you!"

The conditions faced by the workers—often recent migrants to the UK, in particular from South America and Africa—are appalling. They receive the bare minimum statutory sick pay—nothing at all for the first three days off sick, followed by payments of £94.25 a week. They are allowed only the statutory minimum holiday of 28 days. However, this includes bank holidays, which they are forced to take when UCL is closed—leaving them just 14 genuinely free days. Maternity leave is also limited to the statutory minimum and security officers and some cleaners receive just a 3 percent employer pension contribution.

For this poverty pay and wretched conditions, they are

often forced to work 12-hour days at unsociable hours, with management demanding heavier and heavier workloads every year. Some newer employees are being put on zero-hours contracts, with no knowledge of when or how much they will be working each week.

One cleaner told a WSWS reporter, "new workers have even fewer rights. Zero-hours contracts, you know, people being phoned to come in tomorrow for two hours. No bank holidays, no Christmas, no holidays, nothing. And there is more and more work to do. Six years ago when I first came here, I had to cover two buildings, now it's four."

UCL is far from an isolated case. Just this year in London, outsourced workers carried out strikes and protests at the University of London, St George's University, Greenwich University and the University of East London. The same fundamental issues are involved in the upcoming strike by academic staff in the University and College Union (UCU) at dozens of institutions.

Universities began escalating their use of outsourcing contracts in 2011, in response to reductions in financial grants received from central government. The representative organisation Universities UK wrote in a note to its members that these practices were a means to "drive efficiencies" and ensure "value for money". Between 2010 and 2017, 42 universities across England, Scotland and Wales increased their spending on outsourced workers by 70 percent.

These are the same institutions which, on average in England, pay their top staff an annual salary of £253,000—not including accommodation and pension pots—a 3.5 percent increase on last year. UCL's provost, Michael Arthur, was paid a basic salary of £368,000 in 2017-18. In the same year there was a national 15 percent rise in the number of managers in the £100,000-plus pay

band.

Management have overseen the transformation of the higher education sector into a market for high price-tag students and property speculation. UCL is planning an expansion at the Olympic Park in Stratford at a cost of more than £500 million and on the basis of an increasingly insecure workforce.

The IWGB action and upcoming UCU members strike reflect deep-going shifts in the wider economy. There are around 3.3 million outsourced workers in the UK and 4.7 million workers in the “gig economy”—a doubling in size over the last three years. At least 7 million people are in precarious employment and more than 320,500 self-employed people in Britain are working two or more jobs. Nearly 80 percent of those categorized as self-employed are in poverty.

The development of this catastrophic situation has been presided over by the trade unions and Labour Party, who have systematically sabotaged every major act of resistance by the working class over the last four decades. Thousands of outsourced workers, completely abandoned by the union bureaucracy, have sought to break away in recent years and find a new avenue of struggle.

As a security officer told our reporters, “We’ve always had unions at UCL, the main one being Unison. What happened with Unison was they never bothered with us workers because they’re cosy with UCL. They are management’s chosen union to work with. They get invited to their meetings, they’re very friendly. And for 10-15 years, people could hardly get Unison to do anything for them.”

The IWGB shares the same bankrupt nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective of the trade unions as a whole. Its hostility to any genuine opposition was demonstrated by the hostile response of the IWGB hierarchy to the presence of the Socialist Equality Party.

Upon arriving at the picket lines, SEP members engaged in discussion with a group of striking workers about the party’s election campaign. One person asked if Scripps would like to speak to strikers from the platform that had been organized and took SEP members to arrange this with an IWGB organiser. After establishing who we were and reading our material, the organiser said, “We already have a set speakers list. We’re not going to give you space on our platform” and refused to discuss the matter further.

The list, it turned out, included Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) and UCU representatives, Gordon Nardell—the Labour candidate for London’s Cities of

London and Westminster constituency—and *Guardian* columnist and Labour member Owen Jones. That is, representatives of the same organisations which have suppressed workers struggles for decades, and particularly over the last four years since the nominally left Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn won the party leadership.

Nardell told the rally that there was in fact “nothing radical” about what the IWGB was demanding—namely basic sick pay, holidays and pensions, and an end to discrimination and unfair workloads. He did not mention that these conditions are now commonplace due to his own party’s record—along with the unions—in refusing to fight the employers who have imposed such enormous attacks.

This is why the SEP, which has consistently exposed and fought against the betrayals of the trade unions, and Thomas Scripps, the only candidate standing in the Holborn and St Pancras constituency who attended the strike, were not allowed onto the platform.

One worker and IWGB union member who responded enthusiastically to the SEP’s election statement said, “I honestly do not know why he said no to you speaking ... [but] I think you should be allowed to speak.”

Outsourced and “gig economy” workers at UCL and everywhere require a new strategy to fight for improvements in their working conditions and living standards. The IWGB does not represent a break from the trade union bureaucracy. What is required is the creation of fighting, democratic organisations of the rank and file, that are independent of the trade unions. These organisations must be based on a socialist programme that puts workers’ wages, terms and conditions above the rapacious profit interests of the corporations and management.

This is the perspective being fought for by the Socialist Equality Party in the General Election.



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