

Eight-day strike by 40,000 UK university workers begins

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25 November 2019

More than 40,000 lecturers and other staff are striking for eight days at 60 UK higher education institutions from today against an onslaught on their pay, conditions and pensions.

The strike follows a breakdown in talks between Universities UK (UUK) and the University and College Union (UCU).

Employees at 43 universities held two separate ballots and voted yes to strike over both pay and pensions. These include the Goldsmiths College, Queen Mary University of London, Courtauld Institute of Art, the Open University, University of Manchester, University of Leeds, University of Sheffield and University of Glasgow. Staff at another 14 institutions are striking over pay and at a further three over pensions.

The UCU ballot result showed a determination to fight the decimation of pay, conditions and pensions. At 69 higher education institutions balloted over proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS), 79 percent of those voting supported strikes. Of those who voted at 147 universities over pay, 74 percent backed strikes.

This year employee contributions to USS shot up from 8 percent to 9.6 percent, with further increases likely. After eight years of attacks on their pension scheme, a typical USS member is being asked to pay £40,000 more into their pensions but will receive almost £200,000 less in retirement—leaving them £240,000 worse off in total. Pay has fallen by around 21 percent in real terms since 2009. Leading up to the strike, Universities UK and the Universities and Colleges Employers Association published an Open Letter to staff that made no reference to including talks on pay in future negotiations.

Earlier this year, the UUK warned that increases of

between £250 million to £612 million in USS contributions were “simply unaffordable” for many institutions.

Rather than fund the scheme, the UUK is planning to fire thousands of full-time staff. The *Financial Times* (FT) noted, “The extra annual contributions equate to up to 14,000 full time equivalent roles, according to Universities UK estimates.”

This offensive against jobs and pensions is backed by a massive strike-breaking operation. Last week the FT revealed that UUK had demanded that institutions affected by strikes “minimise” the impact by using “other teaching staff and rescheduling lectures, with some also threatening to dock pay and pension contributions during the walkout.”

Around a million students are impacted at the universities involved. Many students will support the strike, as indicated by a poll by the Students’ Union at London’s Royal Holloway University. In a poll of 800 students, 70 percent voted “To support the UCU’s strike action and its stance in its entirety.”

Everything is being done by management to divide staff from students, under conditions in which students are angered at rising tuition fees and continuing cuts to higher education budgets.

The University of Liverpool warned it was “unlawful for students to join pickets.” It advised that those who cross picket lines “can request to be accompanied by campus support [security] officers.” Any students backing pickets would be marked as absent: “No consideration will be given at exam boards for teaching that takes place as scheduled but which students choose not to attend.” Another sinister threat is that “Any international students who choose not to cross picket lines to attend teaching sessions risk jeopardising their visa.”

At Sheffield Hallam University, management are asking students to fill in an online “record of teaching activities not taking place” to “help us monitor and record the teaching activities that are affected by staff taking industrial action for the purposes of planning for any alternative arrangements.”

University workers and students must oppose draconian attacks of a piece with the offensive of the ruling elite in the face of a resurgence of struggles by the working class in Britain and internationally.

Earlier this month the High Court, citing ballot “irregularities,” banned a strike by 100,000 postal workers who had voted by 97 percent to fight attacks on their jobs, pay and conditions.

This weekend, as train drivers respected the picket lines of conductors for a second time at West Midland’s Trains, the Tory government announced that it will ban all out strikes by rail workers. Rail workers are described as “essential workers,” a description that will be applied to virtually any group of workers in today’s interconnected society.

In the face of these attacks, the UCU pleads only for further negotiations aimed at avoiding “upcoming disruption” and has made no call for unity with workers in further education or the wider public sector.

UCU members only face these attacks on their pensions, pay and conditions because their leadership caved in to the employers last year and ended the largest ever strike in higher education institutions, as workers at 65 universities brought campuses across the country to a standstill.

The UCU claimed to have extracted concessions from UUK over pension rights, but the deal left strikers in virtually the same position as before.

Instead of seeking to mobilise students behind staff in a joint struggle, UCU General Secretary Jo Grady declared, “Students should be asking serious questions of their vice-chancellors and putting pressure on them to get their representatives back to the negotiating table with serious offers that address all the issues at stake.”

The largest public sector union, Unison, has 50,000 members working in universities and capitulated to anti-strike laws last week—after 66 percent of university members voted for strikes over pay but the turnout did not meet the 50 percent of all eligible voters required by the Trade Union Act. At the University of Sussex, it advised members that it was “unlawful for UNISON

members to join UCU colleagues in the coming strikes...” The union is condoning strikebreaking, declaring, “UNISON colleagues coming onto campus will unavoidably need to cross UCU picket lines to be able to do their jobs.”

Were it not for the Communications Workers Union, today’s strike would be taking place at the same time as action by postal workers with up to 150,000 workers involved in a powerful struggle against the Conservative government. Instead of defying the anti-democratic court injunction, the CWU launched an appeal to the High Court while even ruling out any re-ballot for action until at least the new year.

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

Lecturers, staff and students must reject all claims that high-quality jobs, pay and good pensions and the right to a quality education are “unaffordable.” The resources exist in abundance. The problem is capitalism, a social and economic system based on the exploitation of the working class and gutting social rights to secure the profits of a tiny ruling elite.

We urge education workers and students to contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss the critical struggle ahead.

The author also recommends:

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

[19 September 2019]

University and College Union sells out UK lecturers strike

[18 April 2018]



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