

Strikers at UK universities speak on their working conditions, pay and pensions

“If you just marketise education, it is not a public service anymore; it is just a commodity”

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporting teams spoke to strikers on picket lines at several universities in the UK during the first and second weeks of their ongoing 14-day strike. Up to 50,000 lecturers, technicians and library staff are involved in the strikes—the largest ever in higher education in the country, with workers walking out at 74 universities. They are opposing increased workloads, casualization, pay restrictions and demands from university management that they increase their pension contributions. These are being imposed as the result of the on going marketisation of education being imposed by the employers and being intensified by the Conservative government of Boris Johnson.

London

Vicki Barrs, from the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team at University College London (UCL), said the dispute was not “just about lecturers or staff in a particular pension scheme, but all academic issues, all staff. It’s also about pay and conditions, parity and contracts. Lots of administrative roles are on fixed-term contracts because we have this project so we will put someone on it for a fixed-term contract. I have been at UCL for six months. In my previous job I was on rolling contracts for two-and-a-half years. You can’t make any life choices without job security. Lots of people in admin [administrative] jobs, not lecturers, are also at risk from the cuts.”

She predicted “many more days on the picket line.”

On the issue of attacks on pension rights, Vicki said, “It’s a long time before I get to enjoy that pension. We are putting so much money into that pension, and they are trying to get us to increase that contribution.

“I am concerned about privatisation of education, like the National Health Service,” she said. “I work with medical science people connected to hospitals around London and the government seems to be continuously taking out public funding and wanting private funding, so it’s not going to be public anymore. There is a big conversation about whether we are a public institution or are we a private one. It is all about profitability.”

Dr. Ulrike Sommer, a senior lecturer in the European Pre-History Institute of Archaeology, said, “I think it is a total disgrace that they try to touch our pensions. We academics start our working life fairly late in life. We normally don’t have an uninterrupted history of employment, so we are utterly dependent on a good pension. We pay into the pension, which is going down anyway.

“In relation to my discipline, it makes it very unattractive to future

students. If you look at the low pay they get in commercial archaeology, that is another sector where low pay is keeping people away. If you want culture, you have to pay for it.”

Dr. Sommer made the point that the attacks on education “didn’t start with Brexit. It started with raising tuition fees to £9,000, which means that only rich people can afford to study nonstandard subjects. I come from Germany, where education is still free, and I think it is everybody’s right and I am totally against fees and charging for education because it has turned archaeology into a niche subject for people who can afford it.”

She called for “free education for everybody ... people have to fight for it. It’s not going to happen by itself and certainly not under this government.”

Dr. Thomas Kador lectures in arts and sciences at UCL. He said, “I am here for the same reasons that I was here last November and in 2018. It was clearly about the pensions, but it is getting more pressing. In particular, pay has decreased over the last decade. The key is the major inequalities in the sector, the casualisation of junior staff. We can all empathise with that. I was on several post-doctorate contracts. We have all been there, gone through that mill, and we just have to stop it.

“Then there is the gender and BAME [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] gap that exists in higher education. Women are still paid less. They are treated less favourably than their male colleagues in lots of different ways.

“We work 60, 70, 80 hours a week through our working life, and then they tell us they can’t guarantee what we are going to have afterwards. This is simply criminal.”

In relation to the 2018 national university strike, Thomas said, “Our union leadership climbed down; they conceded too early. We had momentum; there was energy; there was no reason and the ballot was still valid for another few months, so we could have easily continued the strike in the third term.

“There was no need for a climbdown before anything was agreed to, and then you got this push [by the UCU] to get an experts’ panel. Nothing was agreed, it was just prolonging the issue, and that is why we had to come back out again this year. Hopefully, this time we can stay out until we have a full agreement.

“We have a new union secretary, but obviously the key officials are still in power. Hopefully they realise that the mood has changed, and there won’t be the same climbdown that happened in 2018, or we will just be out again in a year or so.

“Particularly about the pensions, we can’t keep going on strike over these issues. The USS [Universities Superannuation Scheme pension fund] is viable. We don’t need to make it gradually unaffordable by increasing [the share that employees pay into it]. But there are government

aspects to this. The pensions' regulator was specifically set up to damage or destroy defined benefits pensions."

Camilla Maspes, a student of European Studies at UCL, said she was supporting the strike because "it is extremely important to do something against this increasing privatisation. Coming from Germany, where striking academics is unthinkable, they are state employed. It just wouldn't happen.

"I missed 20-25 percent of my academic studies last year. I support the lecturers, but I am speaking from a very privileged position because I am financially comfortable. I can get access to all the resources some other way. But there are other students not in my position and for them it is really hard."

Sheffield

A picket was set up outside the Firth Court building of the University of Sheffield, the main administrative centre for the university, which also houses the Department for Molecular Biology, Biotechnology, Biomedical Science and Law.

Joe is a Ph.D. student at Sheffield Hallam University and works as a teaching assistant there. He said he is striking for the third time in two years to oppose the wholesale "marketisation of the education sector" and the "indebtedness of students."

"This is the third time we've been out to keep the relatively decent pensions that we do have and to prevent terms and conditions from being eroded any further," he said. "The money that has gone into the higher education system has been for shiny new buildings and £400,000 vice chancellor salaries.

"They've cut things like adult life-long learning down to the bone. This university was founded around 1903, and it was meant to be within the reach of any working-class person to send their child to university. That's not possible anymore."

Asked about his views on the upsurge of working-class struggle internationally, Joe replied, "To be honest, our dispute here is minuscule. It's nothing compared with what's going on at the moment. The refugees are being bombed in Turkey now with the new military offensive against the Kurds. It's nothing in comparison to the massive environmental crisis that we face. It's a small part of that fight."

Joe said that the union leaders had been "sitting on their hands" as successive governments imposed austerity over the last decade.

"I'm familiar with the work of the union bureaucracy. In 2018, they tried to sell out our strike. After three days of [industrial] action, they tried to shove a deal down our throats that none of the members wanted. We had a membership revolt. We threw out the old leadership of the union. We've got a new leadership, but I don't think they're any better. I think they're talking left but really they don't have any coherent strategy for how we're going to win this dispute.

"The agreement last time round only kicked the can down the road. But we took that so that we could get better organised for the next time. But as far as I can see, we're no better organised down the line.

"I think we need leadership that comes from the rank and file. We need a leadership that's got a fighting strategy. What kind of leverage are we going to bring against our employers? I don't see much of that. All we're doing is treading water. We've got demands in terms of reduced pay and casualisation, ending of zero hours contracts, but essentially it's a defensive struggle."

Joe said that he had been in a "socialist" organisation previously but did not think "many of the groups on the left had much of a plan." He said, "I want to get rid of this Tory government, rid of capitalism, and I want to

see a socialist world." He agreed to study the WSWS article on the dispute and visit the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Manchester

Lecturer Alissa has worked in the psychology department at the University of Manchester for three years. "I did my research in the United States," she said. "I'm supporting this dispute from the perspective of a faculty member and from the perspective of a student, from the teaching and learning environment.

"From the perspective of a faculty member, the workload has increased dramatically. They're pushing more and more students into the programme without raising the number of staff. Staff are constantly asked to do work to increase the NSS (National Student Survey) scores, one of the metrics they use to rank the university. It's very important for the league tables. So, there's pressure to do all kinds of extra work. In general, I don't work 37 and a half hours a week according to my contract, I work much more than that.

"When I am at work, I'm very stressed, I'm trying to juggle all these things, individual meetings with students, planning lectures, giving lectures, and trying to keep up with my research. I'm quite lucky, I am on a permanent contract. An increasingly smaller proportion here have a permanent contract. They're on temporary contracts, zero-hour contracts. This is what they do with a lot of the graduate teaching assistants.

"They are teaching courses, they say here is what you have to teach, they may not be an expert in this. They have to do prep [preparation] work, and they get paid for a very minimal amount of time for doing this. They allocate you two hours for this, but if you want to a really good job teaching the course, you have to do much more. Their hourly wages are quite low. That's one of the reasons we are striking—to reduce the number of precariat contracts.

"I've worked in the US; I've worked in Italy. It's not just a problem in the UK—academia being vandalised. There are lots of graduate students going on strike, like at the University of California. In Argentina, they hire professors to teach courses for \$3,000 without any benefits, no office space, teaching classes at eight o'clock in the morning and seven o'clock at night. I was talking to a colleague in Peru, and she said it's the same kind of thing happening there. I have friends in Brazil, particularly with the new Bolsonaro government, academia is under threat.

"There seems to be a lack of leadership to unite everybody. In the US we've seen a decline of the unions."

Orlando is a third-year student at the University of Manchester. He said he supported the strikes by university staff "as the immediate pressing issue is pensions for lecturers being cut back, but more broadly speaking a lot of students and lecturers are here to kick back against the financialisation of higher education and marketisation of many other of our industries."

Asked his thoughts on the strike in the UK being part of struggles by educators throughout the world and the necessity for these to be unified on the basis of the fight to defend education as a social right, he said, "It's incredibly important because if it's just lecturers who are striking as it is here, then university management can just ignore that. And that goes for broader sectors because unless you have workers uniting and coming together to turn the screws, smaller resistance groups can be ignored. Unless we get broader groups of resistance nothing will change."



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