

UK university workers face a political struggle against Johnson government

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The strike by up to 50,000 lecturers, technicians, library and other university staff has entered its third week. It was called after the University and College Union (UCU) failed to reach an agreement following months of talks with the employers' organisations.

University staff are opposing increased workloads, casualisation and pay restrictions. They are also resisting demands that they sharply increase their pension contributions. Universities UK (UUK) represents universities in the pension dispute and the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) in the pay and conditions dispute.

Staff walked out yesterday and will return to work on Friday, having already struck for five days since February 20 as part of a rolling series of stoppages over 14 days. Industrial action will culminate next week with a five-day walkout.

The strike is the largest ever in higher education, with staff taking action at 74 universities. Around a million students were affected during the national strike in November/December of last year. With 14 additional institutions, another 200,000 students are impacted.

UCU members are fighting because they know there is no alternative. Not only are pensions on the line that many have paid into for decades, but the very future of further and higher education provision is at stake.

In 2018, the UCU sold out a national strike against pension cuts based on a promise by UUK to establish a Joint Expert Panel. A critical element in that betrayal was the UCU's refusal to turn the struggle into a general offensive against the marketisation and privatisation of education at all levels.

The attacks facing university workers today, including the casualisation of large swathes of the sector, are the result of two decades of policies implemented by successive Labour- and Conservative-led governments to escalate the marketisation of education, with the aim of

wholesale privatisation.

In 2017, the Conservative government's Higher Education and Research Act established the framework for privatisation of higher education, aided and abetted by the retreats and betrayals of the UCU, the National Union of Students and the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn, which demobilised and stifled mass opposition from students and academic staff.

The act replaced the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for Fair Access with a new Office for Students, which is to be a "market regulator" and "competition authority" for higher education. It is empowered to grant degree-awarding powers to new education providers without requiring them to demonstrate a track record of successfully delivering higher education, as was previously the case. These institutions will be allowed to use the word "university" in their titles, opening up the higher education "market" to private providers.

There are already six private institutions with degree-awarding powers, largely in business, management, law and health care-related subjects. There are at least 674 different private higher education providers with a student population of more than 160,000.

The new system has created winners and losers.

Many universities are facing financial pressures, with nearly one in four in deficit in England in 2018-2019 and warning of redundancies. This compares with one in ten universities in deficit in 2012-2013. In 2017-2018, when 32 universities in England recorded a financial deficit, totaling £173 million, 12 cut the number of academic staff by nearly 900 over three years. Under the new regime, universities will not be bailed out by the government and will be forced to close or merge with others.

Brexit is exacerbating the crisis, leading to a reduction in the number of European Union (EU) students, since they will have to pay fees at the even higher, overseas

rate. It also means the likely end of EU funding for scientific research.

The drive by universities to increase income and cut costs has gone along with a sustained attack on the academic workforce. Most teaching today is done by a casualised, exploited, underpaid and insecure workforce. Many are employed on a variety of fixed-term, hourly paid, fractional and even zero-hour contracts.

According to a 2019 UCU survey, around 70 percent of 49,000 university researchers are on fixed-term contracts. Many more are employed precariously on contracts that are nominally open-ended, but with built-in redundancy dates. Fully 37,000 teaching staff are on fixed-term contracts, with most being hourly paid.

In their fight against these intolerable conditions, and to defend education as a social right, university workers confront a hostile force in the UCU. Having had to call the latest action due to the determination of its members to fight, the union has done nothing for months but beg for compromises from the UUK and UCEA, which refuse to budge.

The UCEA declines to meet any pay deal above a paltry 1.8 percent, under conditions in which pay has dropped in real terms by 21 percent since 2009. The UUK is similarly insisting that staff bear the brunt of funding the pension scheme.

The UCU's London region declared Monday: "So far, the employers have not increased their pay offer" and have "made very limited concessions on casualisation, pay inequality and workload." The union's response was to call on members to attend a lobby today outside the negotiations to "help us make the case!" Its statement added, "The employers could negotiate to end the strike in the interests of staff and students."

This struggle is against not just the employers, but against the Johnson government. A report issued this month, "Universities at the Crossroads," by the right-wing Policy Exchange think tank, describes the higher education sector as "out of touch." Licking their lips, the authors declare that due to "all the funding and competitive pressures on the sector, higher education is a 'sitting duck' [for the Conservative government] unless it takes more radical action to be more financially sustainable."

Policy Exchange was founded by hard Brexiteer and leading Conservative Michael Gove, who as minister for the cabinet office advises Johnson on developing and implementing overall policy.

At the end of last year, the UCU called off another

national strike just prior to the December general election, holding out the prospect of a Corbyn Labour government coming to power and acting as the saviour of higher education.

Just as workers cannot rely on the trade unions, which function as adjuncts of management, they cannot rely on the Labour Party—a tried and trusted party of big business. The first major education policy imposed by Blair's government, in September 1998, was the introduction of tuition fees nationwide for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

All talk that Corbyn would have reversed any of this has been exposed as a fraud. After years of capitulating to every demand of the Blairites, Corbyn achieved nothing in his declared aim of opposing austerity, militarism and war—with Labour now set for an even sharper move to the right.

Right-winger Sir Kier Starmer is expected to win the leadership contest next month, with another of the candidates, Lisa Nandy, declaring, "We cannot carry on going around as a party making promises to nationalise everything or slash tuition fees." The nominal "left" candidate Rebecca Long-Bailey speaks of a fight for "the soul" of education and support for strikers but will sit loyally in Starmer's cabinet alongside Nandy.

Education workers must wrest the struggle from the suffocating confines of the UCU and establish rank-and-file committees that operate independently of the bureaucratic apparatus. They must unite workers and students throughout the entire education sector in opposition to the onslaught of the employers and the government.

These independent organisations must be animated by a perspective of building a new political leadership that opposes the pro-capitalist politicians of all the main parties and sets out to defend high-quality publicly funded education as a universal right.



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