

University and College Union prepares sellout of UK universities national strike

Thomas Scripps
11 March 2020

University and College Union (UCU) General Secretary Jo Grady has revealed the union's initial moves towards a sellout of its members striking at universities nationally. This week, staff are striking for the final five days of a 14-day stoppage spread over the last four weeks.

Grady said March 5, "We have made it crystal clear to employers that we are not inflexible... we have extended an olive branch to employers by offering to compromise on some of the demands which we started our industrial action with."

Without providing details that the employers' representatives "have been receptive in principle" to commitments on "workload, job security, and equality," Grady affirmed the UCU negotiators' willingness to "make significant concessions on the other elements of the dispute, relating to pay."

"They have indicated that an offer of a 3 percent increase in pay to members could resolve the dispute. This is significantly lower than the 3 percent plus RPI (a total of at least 5.2 percent) which we initially demanded, and which would still not go far enough to compensate for a decade of persistent wage suppression by employers."

On pensions, Grady again made unsubstantiated claims of "progress" in the employers' position, before revealing, "Until now, we had maintained that employers needed to cover all of the contribution increases that have been imposed since 2017, so that members would return to paying only 8 percent of their salary. Yesterday, our negotiators indicated that they would be willing to recommend an offer of 8.4 percent." The UCU have previously allowed employers to increase members' pensions contributions from 6.5 percent in 2011 to 9.6 percent in October 2019. The employers plan to increase this to 11 percent in 2021.

Higher education workers are striking against attacks on pay and pensions that are the direct result of the UCU's sellout less than two year ago, in April 2018. The union

demobilised mass resistance on the part of workers and students to establish a Joint Expert Panel (JEP) on pensions with the employers, who have continued to pursue their own agenda.

The Universities UK (UUK) employers' body representing universities involved in the pensions part of the dispute said of the proposals in Grady's statement, "It is very clear from our consultation with employers that [the suggested deal] is not affordable for the vast majority" and "includes further conditions, not published on their website, that are wholly unacceptable to employers."

Grady's statement exposes the fraud promoted by the UCU Left faction and its supporters that the resignation of the union's previous leader, Sally Hunt, and her replacement by Grady had transformed the union into an accountable and staunch defender of workers' rights.

The UCU Left is politically led by the Socialist Workers Party, which is well represented in the highest echelons of the UCU bureaucracy. The day after Grady's statement, UCU Left negotiators on the "Four Fights" dispute (workload, security, equality and pay)—Mark Abel, Marian Mayer, Jo McNeill, and Sean Wallis—wrote an article to insist, "Nothing is on the table and nothing has been agreed." Just a few paragraphs later they admit that the 3 percent pay deal "was, and is, a genuine offer to try to resolve the dispute..." Their real concern is that "the General Secretary put out a statement on Thursday that was neither discussed nor agreed with the negotiators."

Grady jumped the gun and revealed the retreats underway before her "left" allies in the union bureaucracy felt able to force them on the membership.

UCU Left initially backed Jo McNeill—a Labour Party member—as their candidate for UCU General Secretary during the May 2019 elections. After Grady secured 64 percent of the vote in the second round of counting, the UCU Left warmly toasted her victory. Its website cheered

“Union takes a leap to the left... UCU Left look forward to working with Jo Grady to transform UCU into a democratic fighting union that can send shivers down the spine of every employer.”

A *Socialist Worker* article declared, “Jo Grady win represents a shift towards the left,” and claimed, “The result can be a boost for workers who want their union to put up more of a fight to defend workers’ rights and education.”

Grady, a former union co-branch secretary and pensions officer who was elected to the UCU’s National Executive Committee last year, came to prominence as a founding member of USS Briefs—a collection of UCU members who wrote articles explaining aspects of the 2018 pensions dispute. The group was part of a range of unofficial organisations which sprung up in response to the widespread anger over the union’s treachery throughout 2018, including Our UCU, UCU Rank and File and the Branch Solidarity Network. The perspective of USS Briefs, however, was always limited to offering polite advice to the UCU leadership on how best to conduct its affairs.

With the UCU discredited among wide sections of higher education workers, Grady came forward to dissipate that sentiment. After her election, Our UCU wrote on its website that the “democratic uprising has now been translated through to the ballot box... The members have spoken and the immediate purpose behind this site has been realised. It will remain online, but it is not intended to add any new content.”

Grady’s leadership has changed nothing. Her manifesto describes the April 2018 sellout deal as an “extraordinary victory.” She only casually mentions that even this required striking branches “to come together to reject a deal agreed by our own General Secretary” that March. This involved thousands of workers descending on mass to the UCU’s HQ in London and denouncing Hunt as she attempted to push through the sellout.

The June 2018 walkout of the UCU leadership from its own conference, to avoid motions of censure, is briefly referred to as an “embarrassing event for our union.”

“Fortunately,” Grady continues, “this year’s Congress is set to consider rule changes, proposed by the recently established Democracy Commission.”

This “Democracy Commission,” held in December 2019, failed to pass motions either limiting the powers of the General Secretary or unelected officers, or giving branches more control over the conduct of strikes.

The current wave of strikes is being carried out

under the same perspective as the last. The union refuses to oppose the well advanced marketisation of the higher education sector and call for a broad struggle—in alliance with other workers employed in education at all levels—in defence of education as a social right. To do so would cut across the UCU’s aim of securing for itself the right to negotiate constant “concessions” as a well-paid labour management service.

Instead, the union went into this year’s strikes by proclaiming as its goal: “we need to put pressure on employers to work with us to accept the findings of the JEP”—the same organisation Grady criticised for failing to deliver “confidence, accountability and transparency.” This bankrupt programme reached a new low earlier this month, when Grady sent Conservative government Universities Minister Michelle Donelan an open letter appealing to her to “put pressure on the employers’ representatives.”

The letter begins, “Congratulations on your recent appointment as Universities Minister—it is a hugely important brief at a crucial time for the higher education sector” and finishes, “During the 2018 strikes one of your predecessors, Sam Gyimah, made a valuable intervention along these lines [pressuring employers!] and we would appreciate your support in pushing for a resolution as quickly as possible.”

Education workers must take the struggle out of the UCU’s hands and organise rank-and-file committees across all sectors on a socialist programme for the defence of high-quality, publicly funded education as a universal right. The Socialist Equality Party will lend every assistance possible to these efforts.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact