

UK further and higher education staff suffer attacks on pay and conditions

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Educators throughout the further education sector who have been returning to schools since the beginning of March are facing pay cuts, job losses and increased workloads as employers attempt to place the economic burden of the pandemic on the working class.

Several strikes have erupted or are breaking out, indicating the determination of workers to defend their conditions. However, they are opposed in this by the unions, chief among them the University and College Union (UCU), which is isolating and shutting down every trace of opposition by staff. The unions are continuing the role they have played since the start of the pandemic—suppressing industrial action in the name of “national unity” and allowing big business and the Conservative government to intensify attacks on jobs, wages, and conditions.

The Open University (OU) announced that it is reneging on a contract agreed with the UCU at the end of 2018, which was meant to come into force in October 2021. The deal was negotiated after five years of negotiation.

The contract affecting over 4,000 staff established that the jobs of associate lecturers would not depend on student numbers enrolled for their module. Associate lecturers, who comprise most OU lecturers, are essentially casual workers, on zero-hours contracts. The new arrangement provided some stability to workers, making their income slightly steadier. However, the university is now claiming that because of the pandemic it no longer has “sufficient systems and capacity in place” to implement the contract starting in October. The UCU has threatened industrial action but has organised no strike ballot.

In Northern Ireland, a one-day strike took place on March 24 across all six further education colleges in the region. The strike was in response to a breakdown of negotiations between the union and the employers. The latest proposal from the employers offered a below-inflation pay increase over 4 years. This after further education pay has increased just a measly 3.8 percent since 2013/2014.

Workers have overwhelmingly rejected the contract, with 567 out 641 (88 percent) voting no. The main complaint

made by the UCU is that during the same period, teacher pay increased by 11.25 percent and that FE lecturers’ pay should rise by the same amount—even though that would still be real wage cut. Underscoring its corporatist agenda, the union declared a dispute not against the employer, but against the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy (DfE), since “the employers say they cannot pay staff more unless Stormont increases college funding”. The UCU is appealing to DfE Minister Diane Dodds, of the Democratic Unionist Party, to negotiate.

The DfE predictably dismissed the union’s appeals, with a spokesperson saying, “Further education colleges are employers in their own right and only if an agreement is reached between both parties through these negotiations, will the Department become involved in appraising any resulting business case.”

The Warwickshire College Group (WCG) has announced its Malvern Hills campus will be closed in August forcing staff and students to travel to a new campus over 20 miles away. WCG said it conducted an 18-month review of its provision and found it was no longer viable to run due to “reduced adult education funding and a diminishing customer base”.

The college currently has around 900 adult learners on part-time arts and craft commercial courses but also offers government-funded vocational programmes including hair and barbering via the adult education budget. Under WCG’s plans, government-funded provision offered at Malvern Hill will be permanently moved to Evesham College, which is 40 minutes away by car and over an hour away by public transport.

WCG was formed through the merger of Warwickshire College Group and South Worcestershire College in 2016. The group now has seven campuses. According to WCG’s latest accounts, for 2018/19, the group generated a deficit before other gains and losses of £2.9 million and net debt of £7.3 million. The accounts show that, as of the end of July 2019, the group was in its fifth year of a “debt reduction strategy linked to a series of property transactions and an

attendant debt amortisation schedule”.

WCG is one of several colleges that have announced plans to close campuses and been met with opposition from employees in recent years. Other include the RNN Group, Cornwall College Group, BMet, Warrington & Vale Royal College and Askham Bryan College. The formation of these college groups is a direct result of the marketisation of higher education, started by the Labour Party in the late 1990s. They operate as holding companies, acquiring various educational institutions through mergers and acquisitions, only to shut down the least profitable ones, with no regards to the impact on the communities they supposedly serve. In the case of the Malvern Hills campus, closing it will severely limit the options of 16-19 years in the area as well as cut choices for adults wishing to re-skill following the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A strike ballot against the London based-United Colleges Group was supported almost unanimously by UCU members, who voted by 99 percent to strike and by 100 percent in favour of action short of a strike. The ballot was called in response to management unilaterally changing employees’ contracts last autumn, adding extra hours of work per week and increasing their workload.

The fact that the ballot only concluded April 9, a full six months after the dispute began, is a testament to the union’s expertise in delaying and suppressing struggles. The UCU has been engaged in backroom talks with the college group, attempting to obtain some concessions that would help the union force the attacks on their members. However, this strategy came up against management’s intransigency, forcing the union’s hand.

Announcing the ballot result, the UCU stated that further weeks will pass before any action is taken, during which time negotiations will be aimed at getting the struggle off the agenda. “Negotiations with UCG Group management to explore a resolution to the dispute are expected to resume after the Easter holidays,” the union said. UCU regional official Adam Lincoln said, “Our members have voted to strike over detrimental changes to contracts by United Colleges Group and we urge management to use planned negotiations to resolve this dispute and avoid industrial action.”

Staff at the University of Leicester have also voted to strike. A ballot result announced Wednesday showed almost 70 percent in favour of industrial action on a turnout of 56.3 percent. Workers are opposing management’s threat to make 145 staff redundant. The university announced the job cuts in January but the response of the union was a convoluted process of failed negotiations and a consultative ballot before finally calling a strike ballot earlier this month. This has allowed the employer to achieve its aim at least

partly, with the union admitting on March 31 that some threatened staff had already taken “voluntary” redundancy or accepted inferior contracts.

In response to the mandate of its members, the local UCU bureaucracy in Leicester said it would offer only “further guidance to members about strike activities and timings during the next few days”, while reiterating, “We are also willing to avoid strike action if the University withdraws the threat of compulsory redundancies.”

Staff at the University of Liverpool voted overwhelmingly to strike in a ballot announced this week. The UCU members voted 84 percent in favour of action to oppose management’s plans to axe 47 teaching and research jobs in the faculty of health and life sciences. Yet again, no industrial action was called by the UCU in response. UCU General Secretary Jo Grady, even while referring to “an overwhelming mandate” to call industrial action, declared, “It’s not too late for the university to reverse these plans for compulsory redundancies, avoiding strike action and further damage to its reputation. We urge it to change course.” This is yet another statement that “voluntary” redundancies will be accepted by the UCU, an agreement they have reached with management on countless occasions over the last decade, with thousands of their members losing their jobs.

Every struggle educators mount puts them at loggerheads with corporatist trade unions, that work to suppress the class struggle and, when they cannot avoid a strike, to isolate and defeat it.

The expansion and unification of the struggles of the working class requires the formation of a network of rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions. These committees will allow workers to fight in their own interests and organise with wider sections of the working class to defeat the attacks of the employers.



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