

UK: 15 Further Education colleges vote to strike over pay and job losses

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Staff at 15 Further Education (FE) Colleges voted for strike action on July 15 for a 5 percent wage rise and in opposition to compulsory redundancies in three of the colleges.

The ballots held by the University and College Union (UCU) returned an 89 percent vote for strike action. Turnout was 62 percent. Strikes are planned to begin in the new term from September onwards, pending negotiations between the UCU and management. The call follows similar strikes and action taken over the past months by college and university staff across Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Years of stagnant pay in the FE sector have left staff in colleges in England earning as much as £9,000 less than schoolteachers. Members of the UCU at twelve colleges voted to strike following a below-inflation 1 percent pay offer from the Association of Colleges (AoC). A UCU press release noted that real terms pay cuts for FE lecturers have totalled 30 percent in the past decade, but the union is only calling for a 5 percent pay increase.

At an additional three colleges in London, UCU members have voted for strike action against plans by the Capital City College Group to cut 30 jobs. *FE Week* reported in June that the group had announced the job cuts while spending millions on a new “teacherless” coding course at its Regent’s Park campus.

The insulting pay offer from the AoC demonstrates the failure of the UCU’s policy of making appeals to the government for “fairer funding”. The UCU formed an alliance with the AoC for years calling for increased funding for the FE sector in England, telling its members that this would lead to improvements in pay and conditions. In August, this funding increase was granted, with £224 million of a promised £400 million being paid to colleges in England. But there was no

improved pay offer.

The UCU called its strike ballot out of concern at the growing opposition and hostility among its membership to successive attacks on wages and conditions. However, any action going ahead is far from guaranteed as the UCU has repeatedly called strikes off at the eleventh hour based on negotiated offers.

In an astonishing letter sent to the AoC, the union touted its corporatist relationship with the employers and its complicity in successive pay cuts. The letter states that one thing which is “unique to our sector is trade union members who have lost almost a third of the value of their pay uniting with their employers to campaign and march alongside them. This is otherwise unheard of, and too precious to put at risk.”

The UCU now complain that, having cooperated with management in securing funding by imposing pay cuts, they are being left out in the cold!

Despite the funding increase, employers have claimed that they are under “severe financial pressure” due to the pandemic. But this does not seem to have stopped them paying enormous salaries to college leaders. Of the 12 colleges where lecturers are set to strike over the real terms pay cut, seven reported the salary paid to their principal. Of these, the lowest base salary was £93,000 at Weymouth College, which also came with a £15,000 pension contribution. The City of Liverpool College’s principal received £179,000 in salary and other benefits. The principal of the Capital City College Group was the country’s highest paid college leader, according to *FE Week*, being paid £235,000 in 2019-20.

The corporatist policy of the UCU has already led to a dead end in Northern Ireland, where lecturers at six FE colleges have been taking part in “action short of a strike” since a one-day strike on March 24 over another below-inflation pay increase. Rather than escalating the

dispute or linking the struggles of lecturers in Northern Ireland and England, the UCU has accepted the employers' claims to be unable to offer a pay rise, appealing for the DUP's Minister for the Economy Diane Dodds to meet with them to negotiate.

Cap-in-hand appeals to the reactionary governments in Northern Ireland or England to provide the funding needed for decent pay and a high-quality education conceals their real agenda of attacking the working conditions of educators and the right of students to the best possible education. In higher education, there has been a wave of course closures in languages, arts and social science subjects after the Tory government announced plans to cut funding for the arts, targeting so-called "dead-end" courses.

The University of Sheffield has gone ahead with plans to close its Department of Archaeology, despite opposition from staff, students and the wider community. The UCU's latest update on the dispute has said that rather than immediately balloting for a strike, the local branch will "enter into dispute with University management," the beginning of a drawn-out process during which members will be told it is illegal to take any industrial action. Similar attacks are happening in universities across the UK.

Further education is coming under attack as well. The University of the Creative Arts has announced plans to eliminate its FE courses and close one of its campuses, threatening 150 jobs. *FE Week* reported in November that the Department for Education (DfE) is planning to send its "School Resource Management" advisors into the FE sector to cut budgets and attack working conditions. The DfE's plans include a "curriculum efficiency and financial sustainability" programme, a euphemism for cuts to course provision, teacher salaries and resources for students.

According to *Schools Week*, when these advisors were sent into schools, their recommendations included getting rid of full-time child protection specialists, replacing experienced teachers with unqualified support staff on term-time-only contracts, and providing children with smaller portions in school meals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the ongoing attacks on educators' working conditions, and on education as a whole. The right to a safe workplace and for children to be protected from a deadly virus has been trampled on with no opposition from the Labour

Party or the trade union bureaucracy.

The recent FE funding increase from the government, coming as part of its campaign to "address the gaps in our labour market", will not lead to an improvement of either education or working conditions in FE, but to masses of course closures, pay cuts and job losses.

To defend jobs at Capital City College Group, lecturers must carefully study the record of the UCU. In numerous higher education disputes, and at New City College in London, the UCU has merely requested that the employers rule out *compulsory* redundancies. When college and university managements agree to this demand, confident that they can make job cuts through "voluntary" means, the UCU declares victory and calls off further action.

The struggles of teachers and lecturers in schools, FE colleges and universities shows that a counteroffensive against decades of attacks on education is possible. This fight must be carried out on a *class* perspective based on opposing any demands made by governments on behalf of finance capital for further austerity.

The betrayals of the trade unions, spanning decades and intensifying during the pandemic, have shown that new organisations are necessary to organise this struggle. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been formed to link up the fights of educators for safety, pay and conditions during the pandemic and forge links with the broader working class. College staff looking to take their fight forward should join the committee today.



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