

Strikes by college and university workers in Britain break out

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The start of the new academic and school year is seeing the breakout of strikes by workers in further education (FE) and higher education (HE). These reflect the anger which has built up throughout the COVID pandemic, as management have stepped up their attacks on education workers' jobs, wages and conditions.

Members of the University and College Union (UCU) at 10 FE colleges joined strikes on September 28 to oppose real-terms pay cuts. In HE, workers at the University of Dundee are on strike over cuts to pensions. Staff at over 150 universities will vote in a strike ballot in October over the long-running pay and pensions disputes.

Staff at 15 FE colleges voted in July to take strike action, rejecting a below-inflation offer from the Association of Colleges (AoC) and opposing 30 job cuts at the three colleges in the Capital City College Group. The AoC recommended that FE colleges offer their staff a 1 percent pay rise. The Bank of England warned on September 23 that inflation rates may remain above 4 percent from this winter into the second quarter of 2022.

Five of the colleges which voted to strike have already been excluded from taking any action by the UCU, after members voted to accept a pay offer in three colleges, and the UCU suspended the strikes in two others for its members to consider a new offer, according to *FE Week*. UCU General Secretary Jo Grady praised the three colleges where the union called off the stoppages, saying that others “need to follow the examples of Weymouth, Bristol and Swindon colleges and meaningfully negotiate on wages.”

It is clear that “following the example” of Weymouth College means relying on the UCU to deliver exactly what the employers want.

While the union is calling for a 5 percent pay increase—an amount nowhere enough to make up for years of real-terms cuts—*FE Week* reported that members at Weymouth College voted to accept a 2.2 percent increase. Far from representing “meaningful negotiations”, this vote was a clear signal that the UCU had no intention of fighting for a substantial pay rise, as its members had already voted to

reject an offer of 2.2 percent in July, according to the *Dorset Echo*.

The UCU is seeking to limit any action it is forced to sanction. Five of the remaining 10 colleges will strike for three days from October 5, and then a full five days from October 11, while there is only a two-day stoppage planned from October 6 at the other five colleges.

At the University of Dundee, non-academic staff began strikes on September 29 against plans to change their Dundee Superannuation Scheme (DSS) pension to a less-secure defined benefit scheme. Members of the Unison union and DSS members in UCU will be on strike for five days in total. Unison said that the changes will cost some members up to 40 percent of their pension. As in many disputes, the struggles of academic and non-academic workers are kept separate by the unions, as members of the national Universities Superannuation Scheme in Dundee, mainly academics, are being balloted separately.

A planned strike at the University of Liverpool on October 4 against job cuts was called off by the UCU at the last minute, declaring “victory” as “not one compulsory redundancy has been made to a UCU member.” The reality of this dispute, during which the university succeeded in making many of the cuts it wanted, shows how the UCU’s tactic of opposing only compulsory redundancies covers for its refusal to defend jobs.

In January, the university announced that it wanted to cut 47 positions as part of a restructuring of the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences. UCU members have struck for 24 days spread between May and August, and in June held a marking boycott that delayed final results for around 1,500 students. During that time, the university repeatedly reduced the number of compulsory redundancies it was seeking from 47 down to the final figure of 2.

The carefully worded claim that “not one compulsory redundancy was made to a UCU member” relies on redefining coerced resignations as “voluntary”.

A university spokesperson told the BBC on September 27 that “[t]he majority of those who remained at risk of

redundancy have now accepted an enhanced voluntary severance offer”. In response to a Freedom of Information request from the *World Socialist Web Site*, the university confirmed that it had already made at least 22 of the planned 47 job cuts in the Faculty of Health and Life Science through voluntary redundancy or early retirement.

The UCU now celebrates the “enhanced voluntary severance package that enabled some of our members to take the decision to leave the University with greater security than management wanted to afford them”, which it only a few days earlier condemned as “an exodus of staff due to #ProjectShame”.

At Falmouth University last month, members of the UCU voted by 80 percent in an “indicative ballot” to strike against the exclusion of newly employed staff from the Teachers’ Pension Scheme (TPS). To get around the contractual requirement of enrolling new staff in TPS, the university has begun hiring through a subsidiary company. “Indicative ballots” are used by the UCU and other unions as a bureaucratic barrier to any strike, inevitably followed—if the UCU sanctions it—by another statutory postal ballot taking weeks and even months longer.

Workers at the Royal College of Art (RCA) are set to walk out for 14 days in October and November over moves to make the precarious employment of many researchers even less secure. The *Architects’ Journal* reported that UCU figures for 2016 showed 90 percent of academics at RCA were engaged on “casual” contracts. Workers are opposed to the removal of “enhanced” statutory redundancy programmes, which would make it even easier to terminate employment, and are demanding employees be moved onto permanent contracts and that the widespread casualisation of the sector be ended.

Many researchers and educators in HE are engaged on short fixed-term contracts, leaving them little job security. This has driven demands for industrial action to force universities to use permanent contracts. However, in the hands of the UCU, this struggle has been repeatedly betrayed. In 2019, the UCU at Lancaster University proclaimed as a “success” the fact that management had introduced a non-binding policy to use permanent contracts “wherever possible.” The branch recently admitted to members that nearly two years on, “nothing has so far changed in practice.”

The UCU has sent out ballots at 153 universities in connection with the dispute over the Universities Superannuation pensions scheme (USS) and the “four fights” over pay, workload, pay gaps and insecure contracts. If, as expected, workers support industrial action, they will hold the first national strike since the UCU used the excuse of the pandemic to call off the same dispute early last year.

In the dispute over pensions, the UCU is calling for the employers’ association Universities UK (UUK) to join with them to jointly lobby the pension trustees to avoid cuts to pensions by investing in riskier, higher return assets.

The national strikes called by the UCU in 2018 and 2019 were forced on its leaders by the anger of its membership, who have seen the collapse of their pensions and working conditions in recent years. That struggle was betrayed, with the UCU demobilising mass resistance on the part of workers and students to establish a corporatist Joint Expert Panel on pensions with the employers, which recommended successive increases in employee pension contributions. UUK’s current proposals for even greater increases are partly based on suggestions from the JEP.

Sally Hunt, the UCU’s general secretary when during the 2018 dispute, was forced to stand down after a rebellion against her leadership—taking home a £400,000 golden goodbye plus her annual salary and benefits of £134,805. But under her successor, Jo Grady, backed by the supposed “lefts” within the union, conditions for workers have only worsened.

The elephant in the room—unmentioned by the union in any discussion of national strike action—is the COVID-19 pandemic. The near silence of the UCU on the pandemic, which is a life-and-death question for the whole working class, indicates more than anything the need for HE and FE workers to build their own organisations which can unify rather than divide workers across campuses and sectors, and link the struggle in universities with that of other workers.

Education workers must take the unfolding struggles out of the UCU’s hands and organise rank-and-file committees, based on a socialist programme for the defence of high-quality, publicly funded education, including decent jobs, pay and pensions for staff, as a universal right.



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