

Strike vote begins at UK universities in disputes over pay, conditions and pensions

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Balloting is underway at over 150 higher education institutions in the UK as lecturers prepare to strike over cuts to pensions, declining pay, the use of insecure contracts in the sector, and unmanageable workloads.

Their fight is part of a worldwide upsurge in the class struggle, which has seen autoworkers in the US, educators in Sri Lanka, metalworkers in South Africa, and many other sections of workers involved in disputes for better pay and working conditions.

The University and College Union (UCU) is organizing the ballots and has been threatening strike action for the past year. But its rhetoric is belied by its reluctance to mobilise its membership of over 100,000 in a genuine struggle. Even as it finally sanctioned ballots, the UCU sought to bring university management back to the table and head off industrial action, declaring that employers have “three weeks to save term.”

The UCU only gave the go-ahead for strike ballots due to mounting anger from university staff, who are seeing their conditions worsen without respite and are itching for a fight against their employers. The union bureaucracy’s main calculation is that a strike ballot now is the best way for its members to let off steam while it negotiates a backroom deal with employers.

As in previous disputes, the union is seeking to sabotage unified action by splitting workers across two disputes (over pay and pensions) and calling on staff at most universities to strike for just one of them. Of the 152 institutions balloted in total, six will be balloted purely on the University Superannuation Scheme (USS) pensions dispute. Another 78 are to be balloted solely over pay and working conditions. A further 68 institutions will vote in two ballots over both USS and pay and working conditions.

The USS fund is facing a huge deficit, and the body has called on both the employer group Universities UK (UUK) and the UCU to provide proposals for “reform” to

its Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC). In a meeting at the end of August, the JNC accepted UUK’s proposal, due in no small part to the unwillingness of the universities to underwrite UCU’s proposals to the same level as their own.

The UUK proposals involve cuts to the more generous Defined Benefit pensions scheme and shunting lower earners to an inferior Defined Contributions pensions scheme. The cuts to the Defined Benefit plan will mean a USS member aged 37 earning £41,526 (the current starting salary for a lecturer in many institutions) can be expected to build up an annual guaranteed pension of £12,170—if they continue to work full-time in the sector until age 66. This compares with £18,857 under the current arrangement. The same 35 percent cut would also apply to the guaranteed cash lump sum which the member would receive when they retire.

The UCU’s proposal, however, is not a significant departure from the status quo. It essentially gives its blessing to the all the cuts that have taken place. According to the UCU itself, a typical member’s pension has already been slashed by £240,000 through changes introduced since 2011.

UCU suggest a negligible increase to employers’ contributions (from 21.1 percent to 24.9 percent) together with an even smaller reduction in members contributions (to 8.1 percent from 9.6 percent). Moreover, the proposal depends on USS changing its March 2020 valuation, which identified the current deficit. The union claims the pensions fund can lower its deficit by investing in riskier, higher return assets—thus gambling even further with its members’ accumulated pension contributions.

The pensions dispute has been ongoing for years, erupting in two massive strikes in 2018 and 2020. In 2018, the UCU—as it tried to enforce a rotten deal—faced a rebellion from its members, who accused it of being “objectively on the side of the employers.” The general

secretary at the time, Sally Hunt, was forced to resign, but not before being given a £400,000 golden goodbye by the UCU. Her replacement, Jo Grady, demobilised mass resistance on the part of workers and students to establish a corporatist Joint Expert Panel (JEP) on pensions with the employers. UUK's current proposal is partly based on suggestions from the JEP. In early 2020, the UCU utilized the COVID pandemic to end another national strike over pensions.

The second issue at stake—the so-called “Four Fights” dispute over pay and working conditions—has also been ongoing for years. Since 2009, the wages of higher education staff have increased by 13 percent, while inflation has increased by 37.3 percent—meaning a 24.3 percent real-terms wage cut. Employers have continually insisted on further below-inflation offers, despite university income from tuition fees growing by a third in the last five years. The latest pay offer from University and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) was just 1.5 percent. At the same time, the last 10 years have seen a massive increase of zero-hours, precarious contracts.

In response, the UCU is calling for a measly £2,500 increase in wages, an amount that is not even close to making up for the income lost by staff since 2009. If wages had kept up with inflation, a lecturer who earned £42,790 in 2009 (the average salary in the field) would be making £58,352 now. However, the average salary now ranges between £48,000 and £50,000—almost £10,000 less.

The union pairs this with demands that employers offer vague promises to “address” excessive workloads and unpaid work and a “framework” to eliminate precarious employment practices and casualised contracts, including zero-hours contracts, from higher education. These ambiguous appeals are designed to allow the union to present even the most token “commitment” by UUK towards addressing workers’ grievances as a “victory.”

The UCU will do everything it can to ensure the fight by academic workers is maneuvered into a dead-end, as it has numerous times in the past. The issue is not just with this or that corrupt or incompetent union bureaucrat, but with the corporatist perspective of the trade unions, which defend the capitalist system by suppressing the class struggle. Contrary to claims by the UCU Left faction and its pseudo-left supporters, including the Socialist Workers Party, it is impossible to transform the UCU into an accountable defender of workers’ rights.

The pandemic has gone unmentioned by the UCU in any discussion of national strike action. Despite numerous

reports that the reopening of campuses has led to outbreaks in many universities, there is no unified tracking mechanism that shows case numbers for all higher education institutions. Each university is being allowed decide on their own whether and how to track COVID infections on their campuses. The UCU has backed the government in insisting that its members are back on campuses despite no sign of the pandemic retreating.

Universities Minister Michelle Donelan told the House of Commons October 12 that cases had been reported on 68 campuses across the country. These institutions, she said, had reported about 9,000 coronavirus cases within the past seven days. Among the worst hit were the University of Nottingham with 1,510 cases among students in the week ending October 9, plus another 20 cases affecting staff, and the University of Bristol with 393 confirmed cases among students, plus three staff cases. The minister rejected calls to halt face-to-face teaching across the country to prevent the spread of COVID warning that this would amount to “punishing young people.”

Higher education workers and students must reject all attempts by the government to divide them with its nauseating and fraudulent statements of concerns for young people and their education.

With COVID resurging everywhere, ahead of the winter, face-to-face learning must be ended and fully funded and resourced remote learning implemented, to be paid for by the super-rich whose fortunes have ballooned during the pandemic.

University workers, in alliance with students, must take control of the struggle with the employers into their own hands, by creating rank-and-file committees which fight for their vital interests, not limited by what the employers and the unions claim they can afford. This struggle must be based on a socialist programme for universal, high-quality, publicly funded education, and decent jobs, pay and pensions for all education workers.



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