

University workers in UK set to strike over pay, terms, conditions and pensions

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On December 1, workers at 58 universities across the UK are set to begin a three-day strike following the latest ballot over a years-long pensions dispute and what the University and College Union (UCU) refers to as the “Four Fights”: pay, workloads, casualisation and equality.

The attacks on pensions being pushed through by the employers increase contributions for many members of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) by thousands of pounds per year and will slash benefits by a third. University workers have faced real-terms salary cuts for many years, leaving real pay 20 percent below the level of 2009, while most researchers are on temporary fixed-term contracts, making it impossible to apply for a mortgage or make plans for the future. A UCU survey revealed that working conditions have deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 78 percent reporting increased workloads.

The ballot showed that over 26,000 workers in higher education are ready to fight back against attacks on their pay and pensions, but they have run into a dead end due to the betrayal of the UCU and its pseudo-left apologists, grouped around the UCU Left.

The willingness to fight over these issues by Higher Education (HE) staff is combined with a growing understanding that the UCU will not wage a serious struggle. Only just over half of UCU members eligible to vote in the ballot did so. Most universities will not take part in the strike due to failing to meet the 50 percent turnout requirement set by the anti-strike laws, which were brought in with no resistance from the trade unions.

The UCU has divided Wednesday’s strike into *four separate actions* on an institution by institution basis, with staff at major universities—even in the same city—called out over different issues. 33 institutions will strike over both pay and pensions, 21 will strike over pay only, and four will strike over pensions only. Workers at six institutions will not strike, but take action *short of a strike over pay*.

In 2018, the mass opposition of UCU members to an initial attempt to sell out a national strike involving 50,000 workers forced General Secretary Sally Hunt to resign. The

replacement of Hunt by current General Secretary Jo Grady was hailed by the Socialist Workers Party-led UCU Left as “a leap to the left,” amid claims that the union would be transformed into “a democratic fighting union that can send shivers down the spine of every employer.” Since then, Grady has worked just as hard as Hunt to prevent HE workers from unifying in a joint offensive against the employers.

Following the mandate for strike action, Grady put out a video statement calling for a single day’s walkout for each of the pensions and “Four Fights” disputes in the current term. This would have meant at most two days of strike action before Christmas, and in many universities where staff are not members of the USS pension scheme would mean only a single day.

Indicative of the way the UCU seeks to divide its members, Grady suggested trading off the interests of one section of workers in the “Four Fights” against another. A list of questions sent out to be discussed by each branch included, “Do members support the strategy of prioritising the injustice of casualisation, over pay, equality and workloads?” Days earlier Grady had acknowledged that the mandate of tens of thousands of workers for a strike put the union in “an incredibly strong position” to fight for its demands—only to turn around and suggest that workers can only win one demand by abandoning others!

Grady and the UCU are making last minute pleas in a desperate attempt to get this week’s strike settled and warning employers that many more workers could be involved in the new year. A November 25 article on the UCU site announced that “members at 42 universities will be asked to back strike action” over pensions, pay and working conditions, “in ballots that open on Monday 6 December and close on Friday 14 January.” This could result in “a period of sustained and escalating industrial action. There is still time to avoid this disruption, but that is in the gift of vice chancellors who sadly are still choosing to ignore the serious concerns of staff rather than address them,” said Grady.

This right-wing, corporatist response to workers' demands for a struggle is typical of the unions, which aim not to fight for workers' independent interests—a secure, well-paid job with decent retirement benefits—but to sell to workers what the employers consider acceptable. Hunt betrayed the 2018 pensions strikes to establish a corporatist Joint Expert Panel, whose suggestions were then partly used by the employers to form their current demands for an increase in contributions and reduction in benefits.

Grady has already established her own record of forcing through sweetheart deals.

After staff at 15 further education (FE) colleges voted in July to strike against a below-inflation pay offer, the UCU set about rapidly shutting down the dispute. Grady called on the other colleges to “follow the example of Weymouth [College]”, where workers accepted in a below-inflation 2.2 percent offer in a second ballot after they had already rejected the same figure. More recently the union agreed a pay deal of 2 percent for all but the lowest-paid staff at the four colleges in the South Thames College Group. With RPI inflation currently at 6 percent, these deals represent massive real-term pay cuts.

In higher education, despite claims of “victory” in multiple fights against university job cuts, the UCU only ever calls for *compulsory* redundancies to be cancelled. The aim is to convince the employers they can get what they want through pressuring workers to take “voluntary” redundancy. At the University of Liverpool, the union claimed that all the 47 jobs the university wanted to eliminate in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences had been saved, but by the end of the strike almost half of that number had taken voluntary redundancy or early retirement. Last Tuesday, UCU members at Goldsmiths University of London began a 15-day strike against a plan to make at least 52 redundancies. A statement from the local UCU branch calls only to “#OpenTheBooks” and “engage in meaningful consultation with the union”—a de facto pledge that it will undermine any fight against the redundancies themselves.

Grady's proposals were slightly modified from two separate strike days to three days at each university, following two national meetings of delegates from UCU branches. The *Socialist Worker*, unable to make any more excuses for Grady in the face of the open attempts to undermine workers by the union bureaucracy—of which the SWP themselves comprise a substantial section—painted the polite criticism offered by the UCU Left as a “rank and file rebellion.” The UCU Left and SWP described a two-day stoppage as “tokenistic and ineffective,” but their own call was only for a five-day stoppage before Christmas.

Their mealy-mouthed criticism of Grady is paired with promoting the union's own structures for diverting workers'

anger. The UCU Left describes the two branch delegates' meetings, purely advisory affairs which can be entirely ignored by the Grady faction, as “an informal mechanism for a kind of direct democracy in UCU.”

The calling of strikes scattered about the term, and strictly limited in their scope—in this instance thanks to the UCU's past betrayals—has been a tactic long used by the bureaucracy to avoid leading a genuine fight. While Grady's former supporters in the UCU Left now offer up a few muted criticisms of her, and the SWP says that the strike must not be “left to the foot-dragging union leaders,” none of these groups explain why the previous rebellion against Sally Hunt has led workers back into a dead end.

Workers in HE want a way forward, after tens of thousands have repeatedly voted for strikes despite the UCU undermining every action. The latest strikes have been curtailed before they even start, and education staff need to learn the lessons. No amount of pressure can cause the union bureaucracy—who are thoroughly integrated into management structures and who form a privileged layer within society—to stop agreeing deals favourable to the employers. Any political perspective that seeks to tie workers to these corporatist organisations will lead to betrayals and demoralisation.

To fight for better pay and pensions, and against worsening conditions, workers need to establish fighting organisations they can truly control, outside of the discipline and stranglehold of the trade union bureaucracy. Educators and staff who want to find out more about establishing their own democratically run rank-and-file committee in their workplace should contact the Socialist Equality Party.



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