

UK: University and College Union shuts down remaining further education college strikes

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As higher education workers at over 50 institutions prepare to strike from Wednesday, the University and College Union (UCU) has been busy shutting down strikes and disputes that have broken out in the further education (FE) sector.

Staff at 15 further education (FE) colleges voted in July to strike, rejecting an insulting pay offer of just 1 percent from the Association of Colleges (AoC). With CPI inflation at above 4 percent, and RPI inflation, including housing costs, at 6 percent, the offer would have resulted in a substantial wage cut. Years of stagnant pay in the FE sector have left staff in colleges in England earning as much as £9,000 less than schoolteachers. A UCU press release noted that real terms pay cuts for FE lecturers have reached 30 percent in the past decade, but the union only called for a 5 percent pay increase.

At five out of the 15 colleges that were meant to strike starting in September, the UCU reached deals with the employers before the strike began. The rest were called out in sporadic stoppages over the past month and a half. The union ensured the division of the workforce, with most colleges striking on different days and only for a few days at a time, ensuring that the action would have a limited effect.

While the union was letting education staff blow off steam, it was engaging in backroom negotiations with employers. Since the beginning of the month, the UCU has begun shutting down the strikes one by one, after agreeing to contracts far inferior to what its members were asking for, in most cases with pay offers still below inflation.

First, the UCU agreed a contract with South Thames Colleges Group, which includes South Thames, Merton, Kingston, and Carshalton colleges. The group offered a 2 percent consolidated pay award for all staff,

with an additional 0.25 percent for staff who earn less than £23,000. The offer also includes a “commitment to review and level up terms and conditions across the group including lecturers’ contact hours and holiday arrangements, as well as a new pay and grading structure”.

This wording commits the employer to absolutely nothing, while the union bureaucracy boasting that it was a victory. Staff at the colleges agreed to the offer on November 8, no doubt realising that nothing more could be won under the bankrupt leadership of the UCU which only called them out to the picket lines for seven days throughout October.

A deal reached with Croydon College includes a backdated 2 percent pay increase for all staff, 5 percent for lower-paid members in learning support roles and a minimum salary for qualified teachers of “around £30,000”.

The UCU also ended a long-running dispute with the United Colleges Group (UCG), formed from the merger of College of North West London and City of Westminster College in 2017. The dispute started in September 2020, when management unilaterally removed timetabled non-teaching hours from staff contracts, resulting in increased workloads. The union hasn’t publicly released details of the deal, but from the highlights posted as a press release on the UCU website nothing of substance in favour of the membership was agreed to.

The new deal vaguely only “paves the way” for a new contract “that includes commitments on working conditions including workload protection and summer leave periods”. The union bureaucracy decided to end the dispute without even having a contract to put in front of workers. What it did contain was effusive praise for management, with regional official Adam

Lincoln saying that UCU “looks forward to continuing the productive relationship with United Colleges Group going forward”. The chief executive of the UCG, Stephen Davis, also highlighted the corporatist partnership it enjoys with the UCU, stating, “We are really pleased to reach an agreement with our trade union partner, UCU”.

For months, the UCU sought a means to shut down a dispute with Capital City College Group (CCCG). Last Friday, the UCU finally agreed a deal, following 10 days of strike action over the past two months.

During the dispute, Roy O’Shaughnessy, chief executive of CCCG, said he was “very disappointed” as strikes continued, claiming his lecturing staff “are already paid more than other further education lecturers in London”. This is under conditions where further education lecturers earn between £24,000-£40,000, barely enough for a living wage in London, the most expensive city in the UK.

O’Shaughnessy said the sector’s “ongoing lack of funding is precisely the reason why we cannot afford to pay the increase in pay that the union is demanding”.

This August the government slightly increased FE funding, with £224 million being paid to colleges in England. However, none of this money found its way to workers. Rather, employers are paying enormous salaries to college leaders, with the principal of the CCCG raking in the most, being paid £235,000 in 2019-20.

Even though CCCG includes City and Islington College, College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London (CONEL), and Westminster Kingsway College, the contract the UCU agreed to only raises pay for lecturers at CONEL, and even then by just £1,500 (slightly below 5 percent). Everyone else will just receive a £700 one-time pay award.

Even taking into accounts the UCU’s sordid record of betrayals of its members, the deal established a new benchmark, ending industrial action with nothing to show for most members except vague promises of future raises. The union described the capitulation as a “victory,” lauding the fact that fresh negotiations on a consolidated pay rise would begin after the Easter holiday in 2022.

In Northern Ireland, 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. Opposed to escalating the dispute and linking the struggles of lecturers in Northern Ireland and England and throughout the UK, the UCU has accepted the employers’ claims to be unable to offer a pay rise, appealing for the Democratic Unionist Party’s Minister for the Economy Diane Dodds to meet with them to negotiate.

These sellouts confirm the UCU’s role, as with all the unions, as a pro-capitalist labour police force who drive workers’ struggles into a dead-end and demobilize them.

New organisations to lead the struggles of educators that operate independently of the trade union apparatus must be established. This fight must be based on the unity between all workers in the further education and higher education sectors who are being systematically divided by the UCU and the other education unions, despite being involved in the same struggles over pay, workload, conditions and pensions.

Such a fight requires the broadest unity between education staff and students, whose right to a high-quality education is being attacked by funding cuts, marketisation of the sector and the widespread casualisation of the workforce.

During the pandemic, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been formed to link up the fights of educators for safety, pay and conditions and the right to security in retirement, and forge links with the broader working class. College staff looking to take their fight forward should join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, attend our meetings and receive our regular newsletter.



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