

UK university staff strike to defend pay, terms and pensions

Our reporters
2 December 2021

Friday is the final day of a three-day strike held this week by workers at 58 universities across Britain. Higher Education (HE) staff are opposing attacks by management that have been mounting for years on their pay, terms, conditions and pensions. These are bound up with the escalating marketisation of HE over the last decade.

The strikes were called by the University and College Union (UCU) over what it terms the “Four Fights”—pay, workloads, casualisation and equality.

The union’s publicity for the strike noted that there had been a 17.6 percent fall in salaries against inflation since 2009, with the lowest paid HE teachers earning just £8.70 an hour. Some 3,545 academic staff are on zero-hours contracts, and 69 percent of research academics are on fixed-term contracts. Four in five staff surveyed said they were struggling with workload and 80 percent of staff said they had been directed towards support for mental health due to workload.

The UCU added that there is a 15.1 percent pay gap between men and women in the sector, a 17 percent gap between black and white staff and a “disability gap” of 9 percent.

Socialist Equality Party members distributed an article on the dispute to strikers at picket lines around the UK.

The article stated, “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...

“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.”

It reviewed previous sellouts carried out by the UCU, including the national strike over pension cuts in 2018, and concluded, “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.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to strikers and students on the picket lines in Sheffield about the dispute.

A senior lecturer with eight years’ experience at Sheffield Hallam University said, “Where do these cuts end? Are these the last fights before we succumb to totalitarian capitalism?

“The main issues for me are the casualisation of the workforce and lack of good jobs. Every year the workload is increased and they squeeze a little bit more out of us, as if we’re working on a production line. But we’re not. We deal with human beings. We’re trying to inspire them and support them to achieve their goals in life. Every year we have reduced time to spend with students doing this. Staff have to step up to fill the gaps because of the lack of resources.

“Contact hours to supervise a dissertation have gone down from 11 hours when I first started, which was reduced to six hours, then four hours the following year. This year, we are given three hours.”

John, a Hallam academic, explained, “We have experienced continually intensifying workloads with very little understanding [from management] of the complexity of modern academia and the skills required in today’s world. This problem has become so profound that we’re unable to function effectively as academics from a research and teaching perspective...

“Contact hours and class sizes are increasing. My student numbers have increased from 14 to 28 in a lecture and for some colleagues they’re 30 which was done without consultation, effectively doubling our workload because of the increased marking. We had a local dispute two years ago about work intensification and those lessons were not

learned. Some changes were made but those are being reverted to inappropriate and too-demanding practices for staff. This is unacceptable...

“Our pay is 20 percent below where it should be. We had a pay freeze last year. We’ve had a 0.5 percent pay increase imposed upon us this year. We all know the rate of inflation [currently at 6 percent]. We understand there are demands upon the university, but there has to be the recognition that staff will not be attracted here or be retained if pay is unrealistic and unfair given our skills and experience.

“At some point we have to say, ‘enough is enough.’ If you don’t attempt to change things, things will stay the same.”

Hallam lecturer **Zoe** said, “Many of my colleagues work under zero-hours contracts which is very stressful for them. Some work for years before having the opportunity to get a permanent contract. Many are afraid to reject work, so they take on more and more. The stress makes them ill. One of my colleagues described it as ‘traumatising’.

“We have high staff turnover because these colleagues will take up offers elsewhere with more permanency. All of this leads to a poor student experience. This makes it very difficult for us because we care so much for the students, we go above and beyond for them. It’s becoming increasingly difficult to do a professional job for them, which is heartbreaking for us.”

Students have shown their support for their staff, joining picket lines around the country. This was in the face of a concerted effort by university management, the Conservative government and the right-wing media to divide students from academic staff on the basis that the strike was preventing them from receiving the full value for their tens of thousands of pounds in fees following the disruption throughout the pandemic.

Joseph, a postgraduate sociology student, explained, “I can see how big the workload is for Sheffield Hallam University staff that I encounter and how stressful their jobs are... I give full support those taking strike action because they have to be looked after by the university.

“These devastating workload issues are compounded by the uncertainty of precarious short-term, casual contracts. It’s a disgrace that people don’t know what their work situation will be in coming months. It’s people’s lives and they have to be able to plan for the future. Particularly younger students and academics don’t know what’s happening month to month.”

Joseph described the unmanaged dangers of COVID on campus: “Learning here is mixed between in-person and online. There are issues with ventilation and lack of fresh air in classrooms. Often, in lecture halls during face-to-face teaching, there isn’t social distancing or mask wearing

amongst students.”

Jess, a student at Sheffield Hallam, said, “I’m here in solidarity with tutors because they deserve not to have crippling workloads. They deserve fair contracts and pay. Also, we as students deserve to be taught by people who aren’t burnt out and who are valued...”

“This directly impacts students. It’s part of a creeping degradation of working conditions with a long-lasting impact on education...”

“Marketisation of education treats students as customers that should seek value for money and oppose striking lecturers. In a few years, these students will be the workers seeking good terms and conditions—we’ll stand in solidarity with them if we need to.”

Owen, a student at the University of Sheffield, said, “I refuse to be used as a meat-shield against the lecturers. They are trying to use the students and the disruption to their learning to turn them against the strike like what happens with patients when the NHS workers take action.

“It is important for students to show their solidarity. They should pay our teachers properly. There is also lot of inequality in pay depending on race and gender.

“Casualisation is a big issue. I will be supporting the strike by [gig economy] delivery drivers at Just Eat in Sheffield next week. It is being used to completely atomise society. They get everyone self-employed to make it more difficult to organise and stand together.

“I agree that the response to the pandemic has been dictated by economic interests. The university offered a track-and-trace system, but they went with the private sector which failed. Then they were asking Dyson which makes vacuum cleaners to make masks. It was all profiteering from the start, there is nothing covert about it.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact