

UK: UCU university reballots confirm members' lack of confidence in the union

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Following a national strike in December lasting just three days, the University and College Union (UCU) has sat on a strike mandate at 58 UK universities in the long-running dispute over pay and pensions, claiming that it would lead a serious struggle after rebaloting additional universities unable to join the strike. The results of these second ballots show that the UCU's delaying tactics, limited action and constant appeals for university management to "see sense" are dispelling what few illusions its members still have about the ability of the union to fight.

In the rebalot on the "Four Fights" dispute over pay, workload, inequality and insecure contracts, covering more universities than the years-long pensions dispute, only 45.5 percent of eligible UCU members returned ballots, less than the 46.2 percent who voted in the same branches last term. Only 9 of the 38 universities rebaloted will join strikes in the pay dispute in the coming term, as the rest did not reach the 50 percent turnout threshold set by anti-strike laws.

This reactionary legal requirement, introduced with no resistance from the trade unions, is adhered to religiously to suppress the class struggle. It would in any case not present an insurmountable barrier to an organisation genuinely enjoying the confidence of its members and determined to fight.

Over 9,300 members at the 43 universities where fewer than 40 percent had voted in the first ballot over the "Four Fights" were not even included in the second. Overall, 259 fewer ballots were cast in the rebalot.

Three of the UCU branches which did clear the 50 percent threshold the second time round only did so because members left the union—for example, the 619 ballots cast in the pay dispute at Newcastle University were only just above 50 percent because the number of members eligible to vote declined to 1,223 from 1,250

in October.

Turnout was generally higher in the ballot over the USS pensions scheme, where the overall percentage increased slightly, but again only due to falling membership. Twenty *fewer* ballots were returned in the rebalot, but 119 members had left the branches being rebaloted, boosting the turnout as a percentage.

There is widespread anger at the years of real-terms pay cuts which have seen pay fall by 20 percent since 2009 while inflation continues to soar, and at the pension cuts which will cost many workers tens of thousands of pounds per year. To defeat these attacks requires a break with the UCU, which has merely pleaded with the universities to make an offer it can sell to its members.

Citing the "cost of living crisis with inflation and energy price rises," the union says that the employers can "resolve the pay dispute" with a £2,500 pay increase for all staff. Sticking closely to the corporatist bargaining process, the UCU has not modified this demand since it and four other unions submitted a "joint claim" in March 2021, when RPI inflation was 1.5 percent. After the recent increase to 7.5 percent, £2,500 would just about meet current inflation for workers earning £33,000 per year. According to calculations by DiscoverPhDs.com, the average lecturer outside of London earns around £40,761, making the unions' starting pay demand a real-terms pay cut. The increase in energy prices alone has cost many workers £230, and National Energy Action has warned bills could rise by as much as £550 when the price cap is increased again in April.

The UCU has yet to announce any strike dates, over a week after it reported the ballot results. It has, however, made clear that it has no intention of unifying workers across universities, or extending the fight into the

working class to politically challenge the increased marketisation of universities. In an email to members, General Secretary Jo Grady announced that her plan will “involve strikes in different regions and devolved nations on different dates, as well as UK-wide strike dates. The action will also progress to a marking and assessment boycott should employers refuse to budge.”

Grady proudly boasts, “Media coverage of our disputes has so far been overwhelmingly positive and we have made employers very uncomfortable”, and justifies the isolated regional strikes as maximising the length of time this positive media coverage will last.

Any strike which genuinely threatened the system of marketisation, in which pay and working conditions are ruthlessly slashed and class sizes continually increased to maximise profits, would be viciously attacked by the corporate media. Even the *Telegraph*, usually the most rabidly anti-strike outlet of the Tory media, felt at ease to quote liberally from UCU press releases announcing the October strike ballot and its results, only quoting the replies from Universities UK and the Russell Group, with no editorial denunciation.

The patronising tone of the media coverage, confident in its assumption that the union will keep the strikes under control, contrasts with the bombastic endorsement of the UCU by the pseudo-left groups.

The Socialist Workers Party, whose members make up a significant section of the UCU leadership grouped around the UCU Left, promoted the UCU’s claim that university workers were in a “strong position to fight”, saying nothing about what the union has done to undermine this position. It advised the union demobilising and dividing the fight in the universities “to escalate strikes and to keep the two disputes together at all costs.”

A member of the University of Leicester UCU is quoted as saying that, in the last ballot, “we were six votes short of being able to strike over USS. This time we passed the threshold... We did everything we did last time, just better.”

In fact, the turnout in both USS ballots was exactly 305 votes—the only reason this constituted just over 50 percent in the second ballot is that 13 members had left the local union branch.

The UCU Left claims to put forward a radical alternative to the current union leadership, but its aim is to defend at all costs the domination of the union over

the class struggle in higher education. Holding up “Branch Delegate Meetings” (BDMs) as “an informal mechanism for a kind of direct democracy” in the UCU, they attempt to bury workers’ initiative under layers of bureaucratic machinery. The branches are dominated by bureaucrats who differ from Grady and other national union leaders only in the scale of the betrayals they force through. Moreover, the union reserves the right to ignore any decision of the “democratic” BDMs!

Whether under the leadership of Grady or the UCU Left, the union will not change its function as an instrument for suppressing the class struggle, which has enforced decades of attacks on university workers. The only path to defeating marketisation and establishing a system of free higher education run in the interests of students and staff is to form genuinely democratic rank-and-file organisations, independent of the unions, able to mobilise workers across sectors and rejecting the entire programme of reaching an “acceptable” compromise with the interests of finance capital.



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