

# UK university workers begin strikes against attacks on pensions, pay and conditions—Unite education workers and students! Build rank and file committees!

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Higher education workers at 44 institutions begin five days of strike action today. Another five will be held later this month and into March, affecting 68 universities and one million students in total.

The strikes, called by the University and College Union (UCU), are the latest in years-long disputes over slashed pensions, insecure working conditions and poor pay in higher education. A typical lecturer on an annual wage of £39,000 faces pension cuts of up to 35 percent. According to the UCU, 68 percent of research academics are on insecure fixed-term contracts. Even before the current cost-of-living crisis, real pay in universities had fallen by around 20 percent in the last decade.

The Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pensions dispute has been ongoing for five years, with a national strike affecting 65 universities held in 2018—the largest ever industrial action in higher education. That four-week strike was sold out by the union. The university employers' association Universities UK, with the backing of the UCU, refused to include a “No Detriment” clause in a deal supposedly guaranteeing that USS members will not suffer further pension cuts.

With the employers pushing for massive increases in members' contributions, the UCU was moved by pressure from below to call another national strike in early 2020, but this was rapidly wound down as the pandemic began. The union then spent over a year making ineffectual pleas to the employers in an attempt to avoid industrial action, while allowing a reopening of university campuses driven by financial rather than educational concerns, leading to a massive surge in infections and students locked in their dorms.

After these appeals fell on deaf ears, the UCU was

finally forced last December to stage the third national stoppage at universities since 2018, which it limited to three days, this time at 58 institutions across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Expressing the growing lack of confidence in the UCU, ballots of workers at 42 other universities received a less than 50 percent turnout—below the legal threshold for authorising strike action.

The UCU has since continued working to demobilise its members. Last week, general secretary Jo Grady sent a desperate letter to Universities UK CEO Alistair Jarvis aimed at “averting widespread industrial action,” and promising “a serious compromise on the part of UCU and its membership”.

Grady's proposals include increasing maximum employee contributions from 9.6 percent to 11 percent in April, along with an increase in employer contributions, until a new valuation of the pension scheme, involving riskier and higher return investments, can be issued in June. Although it says it expects a new “moderately prudent” valuation to overturn the contribution rates in its proposal, UCU's scheme allows for employee contributions to rise to 13.9 percent by April 2024.

But the employers want more and feel emboldened by the UCU's repeated retreats over the last five years to push for it.

They have responded to the UCU's appeals with a punitive campaign against striking lecturers. The Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) recommended its members withhold pay for what it called “partial performance,” referring to those joining the UCU's work-to-rule and for refusing to reschedule classes cancelled due to the strike.

Rescheduling classes involves effectively working for free, as they would be added to an already heavy workload of research, teaching, pastoral support and administration.

Six universities—the Universities of Bristol, Newcastle, Bradford, Queen Mary University of London, City of London University and Manchester Metropolitan University—have threatened to cut 100 percent of pay for workers joining “action short of a strike”, on top of pay deductions for strike days.

The UCU did not do the bare minimum and call on its members to refuse to work for no pay, instead asking that universities “explain how calculations for pay deductions are being made”, and “[warning] employers not to make these deductions as it would only escalate the dispute whilst staff try to continue working.”

Everything the UCU does is to avoid “escalating” the situation and to placate the employers. The last thing the union wants is to jeopardise its partnership with these institutions, which are seeking to claw back the last remaining benefits secured by workers over decades of struggle. Pushed by the employers’ intransigence and their members’ anger, the UCU has proceeded with industrial action, but in as neutered a fashion as possible.

This week’s strikes are purely over pensions, at just 44 institutions. Three days of strike action will take place February 28-March 2 at 63 universities purely on the question of pay and conditions. Staff will strike over the combined issues of pensions, pay and conditions only on February 22 and 23. The UCU has all but declared that further strikes are then off the agenda: “Following this term’s strike action, there may be a marking and assessment boycott and there may also be a round of re-ballots to extend the six-month industrial action mandate which expires at the beginning of May.”

The UCU and the National Union of Students (NUS) propose that only the *final day* of university workers’ strikes on March 2 coincide with a “Student Strike for Education”. Publicity for the NUS strike does not even mention the UCU dispute. This under conditions in which students are also suffering the consequences of the marketisation of higher education—including course closures, worsening learning conditions and sky-high tuition and accommodation costs—and have been similarly recklessly exposed to COVID-19.

Higher education workers must draw the lessons of the last years. It is clear the UCU has no intention of waging a serious fight for their interests. Left unchallenged, the union will foist another rotten deal on their members,

agreed with management behind closed doors.

University workers have sought to oppose the union before. In 2018, a mass revolt by thousands of UCU members, including hundreds demonstrating outside the union’s headquarters in London, rejected a sellout deal ordering a return to work the next day. But despite the UCU being forced to retract the agreement, and former general secretary Sally Hunt’s resignation several months later, the union bureaucracy was eventually able to enforce its betrayal.

A rebellion against the UCU requires a new programme on which to fight the crippling attacks on pensions, pay and conditions and a new leadership to organise the struggle. The strikes confront the wholesale marketisation of higher education, which is driving the universities’ rampant cost-cutting, hurting staff and students alike. They must fight for a system of high-quality higher education as a social right, provided by well-paid, securely employed staff.

Confronted by ruthless employers, backed by the Conservative government, willing to go to any lengths to break their resistance, higher education workers must build rank-and-file organisations independent of the corporatist UCU. These can reach out to workers across all campuses, and throughout the education sector, in a joint struggle to reverse decades of attacks on pensions, pay and conditions. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, formed during the pandemic to organise workers wanting to oppose the union-enforced policies of herd immunity, increased workloads and effective pay cuts.

**We call on university staff and students to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, attend our meetings and receive our regular newsletter.**



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