

UK university staff strike in defence of pensions

Our reporters

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Tens of thousands of university workers at 44 institutions began five days of strike action yesterday against further cuts to their pensions. Under the employers' proposal, the average staff member would lose 35 percent of their retirement income.

Next Monday, another 24 universities will join the strike for two days, protesting a 20 percent real terms pay cut in the last 12 years, insecure employment, unmanageable workloads and pay inequality. The Monday after that, 63 institutions will strike for three days over pay and conditions. The final day of action coincides with a single-day student strike.

Despite the efforts of the University and College Union (UCU) and the National Union of Students (NUS) to stagger and divide the action across different universities and disputes, students and higher education workers were clear that they face the same fight against employers determined to slash spending on staff and education in service to the government's market-driven system. The universities have used the pandemic as a pretext to accelerate this agenda.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with strikers and distributed the statement, "UK university workers begin strikes against attacks on pensions, pay and conditions—Unite education workers and students! Build rank and file committees!"

SOAS, University of London

Neil Robbie, an English teacher at University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), told the WSWS, "We are striking today for our pensions, because USS [Universities Superannuation Scheme], the pension provider, is trying to limit our defined benefit contribution. They want to cap the defined benefit at 40 percent after a certain time.

"UCU have provided alternative proposals and we feel that those are acceptable. The USS have based their cuts to our pensions on their 2020 finances, which were affected strongly by COVID. But it doesn't represent the true reality of their pension funds, which have grown significantly during the pandemic. They are doing very well financially, and they can easily afford the UCU demands.

"The defined benefit gives you a steady and stable pension for the rest of your life which will give you security and stability until you die. The other type of pension which they are trying to replace it with is the lump sum that you draw down on, and it may not last that long. It is a very different type of pension. To be honest, our pension isn't that great anyway. If I retired tomorrow, or in the next 10 years, I am probably going to get around £15,000 a

year—which isn't great. It is just about enough to live on.

"If I got the defined contribution, defined benefit pension, I would get a lump sum—say a couple of hundred thousand pounds or something like that. If I lived to be 90, that is going to be of very little use to me. If I live for five years after retirement, I will be fine but if I live beyond that, it is not going to be a decent pension at all.

"Basically, the defined benefit pension is only available to a few people these days. The police, the [London] Underground, university workers and school teachers still have them. The private sector has rubbish pensions because they are squeezing their employees as they will. They get a draw down pension. They have to accumulate and save in a way that we don't have to in the public sector.

"The reason you join and become a professor or teacher is partly because of the pension. You're not joining for the pay cheque month to month because it's not that great. People who work in the university could join the private sector and earn millions as they're very intelligent people. But they don't. They chose to go into public service.

"At SOAS and other universities, the pandemic has been an opportunity for restructuring. In the summer of 2020, there were major cuts to employment. They were threatening to close SOAS. They said that financially we were not sustainable unless we made serious cuts. These cuts went ahead without much consultation and now we have come out of that, we are facing more cuts in effect with the pensions under attack.

"There is a strong argument to say that various institutions are using COVID as a cover for bringing in some drastic measures. They are trying to make these cuts because there is no one around to say no or to protest. It is almost a state of anarchy in terms of civil society. What can civil society do in order to organise a protest in a time when basic mechanisms are not even functioning properly? It is a very strange time."

Maria Lafalche has worked at the SOAS foundation college for 20 years, preparing students for higher education. She said, "Things have deteriorated. When I started the job, I was looking forward to a more promising pension than I will receive now. Younger people joining as teachers and lecturers will have that opportunity removed. We are contributing more to our pensions, but our employers are refusing to contribute more even though the money is there.

"Every two years we have been on strike, and we are made

promises that are taken away, and so we are back on strike again. Each time, we are losing more in terms of our pension rights. My colleagues that have retired just a few years ago are better off, whereas those of us who will be retiring, including myself, in three years' time will be worse off. Can we afford to retire? Probably not, we'll have to continue working a little longer.

"Our benefits are being removed all the time, and universities are getting richer and richer. Chancellors and vice-chancellors are getting bigger and bigger pay packets, so it's grossly unfair.

"Our teaching has had to adapt during COVID. We had to invest a lot more of our time, learning new skills, how to use technology in a different way. Many of my colleagues have mental health issues because of all the extra work. All these things are not noticed by our management who refuse to commit themselves even though the money is there.

"Already we are going out of our way to help our students, answering emails late into the night from students who themselves have mental health problems. We are working extremely hard, but we are not being compensated for what we do. In the long-term, students will suffer if their lecturers are not well themselves.

"The cost of living is one of the other reasons we are on strike, because so many of the new lecturers are given temporary contracts—almost zero-hour contracts—which means they don't know whether they are working from one term to the next, or one week to the next, so they can't make any long term commitments. This is becoming the norm."

University of Liverpool

At the University of Liverpool, staff picketed outside the Medical School's Sherrington Building, part of the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences. Faculty members struck for two weeks last August after the university announced it would cut 47 jobs. The UCU had claimed a "victory" after management agreed to make only "voluntary" redundancies. A Freedom of Information request by the *World Socialist Web Site* showed that even before the strike had ended, 22 job cuts were eliminated through voluntary redundancy and early retirement.

Alice, a university lecturer, told WSWS she was on strike, "To save my bloody pension! I've lost half my pension in the last eight years, and I'm about to lose another third." She was hopeful the cuts could be defeated, "The union's been saying for ages that the pension fund's healthy and that there's more than enough in it to keep our existing pensions. The USS said yes, the [UCU's] proposals are viable. I think we definitely stand a chance."

Although the UCU has separated the pensions strikes from strikes on pay and conditions, Alice explained these issues are connected, "around one third of the department are casuals, essentially they're on zero-hour contracts and they're not paid for the work they do. They're getting about £5 an hour. They don't know if they have teaching again, they're scared to strike and their conditions are awful! Finding a place to rent when you don't even know if you're going to have work in three months... On our side of the campus, it's one year [contracts], in the sciences it can be two.

"Closing the gender and equality gaps is important for me. Women are earning less than men—it's 15 percent now, it used to be 22 percent at this institution... All aspects of equality are

important: disability, race, ethnicity... it's on a sliding scale, isn't it?"

Alice said working conditions had deteriorated during the pandemic, "The workload goes up and the expectations go up. It was awful because we weren't allowed to furlough, and so we're home-schooling, working 10 to 12-hour days. We're not recovered from that yet.

"We have colleagues who are vulnerable, but we have students who are as well. I ask all my students 'is there anybody who's vulnerable, or who is shielding someone?' I do it anonymously, and that class has to continue wearing masks. I've not had a single student once disrespect that. But the onus is on us to do that. The university's not doing that, the government's not doing that. It's not taking the students into account, is it? I just feel terrible for them."

Another worker on the picket line, **Beth**, told us, "I think if we don't fight to make academia better, we're doing a disservice to the next generation. And there has been a lot of disservice to the next generation for many years on many different levels, and it feels a bit like 'now or never', because it's not fair to push this onto another group of people, who will get even worse conditions and more precarious contracts."

Beth recognised that previous struggles had not prevented the erosion of pay and working conditions, recalling, "There's been many lines in the sand. But we've got to keep fighting."

Dave said he was striking because "I just think it's the right thing to do. Obviously, they're trying to shaft people, that's what managers do. I'm just trying to stand up to them. It's a bit like in the summer. I don't know if you heard about that [the strike over job cuts in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences]. That was a bit more personal, because it was affecting people you knew. I realise that everything needs to be sustainable, including pensions. But it's the wider economic model that's the problem, it's not us.

"There is plenty of money out there. They're obviously just shuffling it about to make it even more to their advantage. They're not doing it to make it work for everyone, they're doing it to make it work for themselves. There's more to it—there's the casualisation, it's been a long-term thing at universities in the last decade or two, they've just made things much less stable and reliable for people. If you're young and you're starting out, you've got to have a fixed-term contract, you might get hourly-paid lecturing, that's taking away a proper sustainable job that you could base your life around. There's all kinds of unfair things going on like pay inequalities."

Dave didn't agree with the artificial division of the strikes over pensions and the what the UCU terms the "Four Fights": "I don't understand the ins and outs of the union's tactics. To me it feels a bit like divide-and-conquer."



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