

“Many people have been on fixed term 6-month contracts for 20 years! Each time it expires they just renew for another six months”

UK lecturers and students speak on conditions they face as strikes continue

Our reporters
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Higher education workers at 44 UK institutions began five days of strikes on Monday. Another five will be held later this month and into March, affecting 68 universities and one million students in total. They are striking against the gutting of their pensions and attacks on pay, terms and conditions.

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!”

Kings College London

Tom, a professional services manager at Kings College London (KCL) said, “We are striking here for several reasons. One is very specific to the way our pensions are being threatened at the moment. Pensions are really important in making sure that you are going to be safe and secure when your career comes to an end. And then we are striking more broadly about equality in so many ways, in making sure that our working environment is safer for everybody and better for everybody.

“I work in the international team at Kings. This is my seventeenth year at Kings College London and my twelfth year supporting students that study abroad. In that time, I have seen working conditions get tougher and tougher, staff feeling compelled to work far more hours than they are paid to. It gets ignored and management just accept that people are working harder and under much tougher conditions, and yet compared to inflation our pay has gone down and our pensions are being reduced. It’s horrible.

“We have tried to phase out the zero hours contracts to a great degree at Kings. There is always that risk that they may get reintroduced, particularly now that times are financially hard, and they are trying to get more work out of staff for less money. But there are certainly lots of teaching staff that are on six-term teaching contracts, not permanent contracts. So, they could be got rid of at any point. There’s that threat of, ‘Oh, we’ll keep you for a little bit longer—please keep teaching—but we don’t think we are going to commit to you properly to give you a proper permanent contract’.

“A pension is like deferred pay, so we all agree that we won’t get all of our salary that we are owed because we want to try and

plan for the future. People are living longer and are able to work longer, so to reduce the value of the pension is really reducing people’s livelihood and their futures. It makes us all feel more nervous and anxious about the work we do, even though we are doing more and more of it over time. Things are being taken away from us as we are giving more to the university, and we hate the fact that students are being affected.”

Tom spoke about the impact of COVID at universities. “We are still working out what is the effect from COVID and where things will go in the future. Staff in universities have been working more rather than less in the past two years, and under more difficult conditions. Working from home, people with kids with poor Wi-Fi, who don’t have enough privacy. We’ve had to keep teaching, keep administering, keep supporting students, but we haven’t maybe had the support we need in return.

“With living conditions being so difficult, you have that sense of anxiety about your role and your job and what you’re doing and the value of it for students and what that means for your future. People might have children to look after, or parents, loved ones that we need to plan the future for, and their pension is being taken away. They are not paying equal pay, across genders and across different divides demographically, it takes its toll on people. It’s a really horrible situation to be in.”

LSE (London School of Economics)

A junior lecturer at the LSE (London School of Economics) spoke to the WSWs anonymously. He said, “I’m here today in solidarity with my senior academic colleagues who are facing cuts of up to 35 percent of their pensions. Many of my colleagues have paid into the pension scheme for many years and feel it’s unfair that they have been re-evaluated in such a way, given the fact that academics have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to provide first class education for our students. And we have not seen a pay rise despite inflation for several years.

“My pension is very small at the moment, because I’m on the junior academic teaching staff. Next week’s strike is addressing issues of casualisation, race, and gender, pay inequality across the scale in academic jobs, overworking, and the lack of a pay rise in line with inflation

“In LSE, we have many staff providing teaching on casual

contracts that only give them pay during the term time or for one year, so a huge proportion of teaching is done by people on those short-term contracts.

“That impacts on education in so many ways. It means that we, as junior teaching staff, can't give our students what we want to give them all the time, because we are always catching up with our own work and applications in our free time, because we don't have a salaried position. That has now been effectively normalised. In most UK universities, a large proportion of teaching is done by PhD students and very junior teaching fellows.

“The marketisation of education is surprising to my students. They have no understanding of how their tuition fees can be so high, and that their teaching staff are going on a strike related to their pay and working conditions. Increasingly, it feels like its privatised to the point where workers are expendable and really trying to give everything they can, but not always being looked after, which is what you imagine in the private economy.

“The last two years during the pandemic were hard. It was hard to manage, especially when we didn't have facilities in the campus. We were shoved out of our offices and were having to do all our work from home. We were working from home and yet still trying to actually provide the same level of education to our students. That means often that you're doing things both face to face when you can and online. It means a doubling of preparation time for teaching staff. It means the research grants and research trips all have to be cancelled or postponed.

“It's difficult to absorb all of that month on month, term after term. It's difficult to keep strong and resilient and focused when you have extra family commitments to people who are unwell or for people who have young children. Many of us have elderly parents who need care. So, all of those other caring responsibilities that were accentuated by the pandemic have been very difficult to manage.”

Picket lines consisted not just of lecturers but were also supported by many students. As a result of growing marketisation of higher education, students face course closures, worsening learning conditions and sky-high tuition and accommodation costs.

Nick, a student in global health and social medicine-medical anthropology at the LSE told the WSWs, “The reason I am out here is because so many jobs here are short-term. One, two, or three years kind of thing, which is very hard in a city like London where rent is very high and there is no security in this job market.

“I can see with the lecturers ahead of me, people that are already working and struggling with these kinds of things, having to reapply for jobs. In terms of COVID, it has been very hard with people trying to work in the office and fewer jobs being advertised, with student numbers falling and then rising.”

WSWS reporters explained that the UCU sold out the first national strike against pension cuts in 2018. Neil replied, “I am not too sure what happened in 2018 as I only started in 2019/20 so I can't really comment on what went before. I understand that [UCU leader] Jo Grady is now saying about going for concessions already, so I will have to look at this issue.

“That's disappointing to hear about the history of this issue as I feel like the union here, has been quite good. I am disappointed to hear about the issues with nurses and the NHS unions too, as I

thought I was broadly aware of the issues around the creeping privatisation of the National Health Service. We had a nurse come and speak at the last rally who was extremely disappointed with the way the NHS was going.

“As a student, I feel quite bad about the working conditions of those teaching me—I think they are extraordinarily over worked and underpaid for the amount of work that they do.”

“When professors come to their class really stressed about the working conditions they are in, we are eventually impacted by it. Our other PhD student friends are also directly impacted by it, because they don't have any job security. We see them on a daily basis stressed about not knowing where to apply, or knowing that wherever they apply, they might only be there for a few months.

“It's hard as master students, living with a thousand cuts, because you've got rising rent prices, rising electric pricing, rising cost of living, rising transport prices. Uni costs increase, but you get so many less benefits. And on top of all that the people who are giving you your education are suffering. Obviously, it's so much harder for them to deliver the same standard of teaching.”

University of Leeds

On the picket line at the University of Leeds, lecturer **Sue** pointed out the ongoing battle for a permanent contract for all, “Many people have been on fixed term 6-month contracts for 20 years! Each time it expires they just renew for another six months. The university officially states we should be permanent after three or four years, but don't follow their own rules.”

Lecturer **Paul** said, “I am on a permanent contract. We have four fights [pensions, pay, conditions, lack of security]. It doesn't affect me directly. I'm not awfully badly paid and my pension is not bad. But I'm here for other people who are affected. I should strike because I can, to stand up for those on worse contracts than mine.”



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