

UK higher education workers continue strikes over pensions, pay and conditions

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Over 50,000 higher education (HE) workers are continuing strikes this week, with two days of action Monday and Tuesday. The action began on February 14 with a five-day strike.

Staff are fighting attempts by university management to cut their already devalued pensions by another 35 percent. The cuts are on top of £240,000 already lost from the average lecturer's retirement income over the past decade.

The wages of higher education lecturers have collapsed. This week the University and College Union (UCU) noted that with the retail price index measure of inflation now at 7.8 percent, staff pay has fallen by more than a quarter (25.5 percent) in real terms since 2009.

Lecturers are also fighting insecure employment contracts, unmanageable workloads and pay inequality. The union notes, "Over 70,000 academics are employed on insecure contracts. The gender pay gap in UK universities sits at 16%, whilst the disability pay gap is 9% and the race pay gap is up to 17%."

The Universities and Colleges Employers Association, are offering a well below inflation pay offer of 1.5 percent on existing salaries for 2021/22.

There has been solid backing for the strike, under conditions where the UK has suffered three nationwide storms during the first week of action. This determination to fight is in sharp contrast to the UCU bureaucracy who have done everything to curtail action from the outset and want nothing more than to see it ended with a rotten sell-out.

The UCU has divided the strike into separate disputes, with last weeks' five-day strike over pensions only. This week, while expanding the strike from 44 universities participating to 68, over both the pension and pay cuts, action is reduced to just 48 hours. Next

week, staff at 68 universities are striking for three days (February 28 to March 2) only over pay.

The 68 universities involved are attended by over 1 million students. But no joint action with students has been organised, except on the very *last day* of strikes on March 2, with a 'student strike for education' called by the National Union of Students.

The UCU's real agenda despite having a mandate to strike throughout the whole of March to May 6, is to end the dispute for good as early as possible. In response to a provocation by six universities—prompted by the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association—docking strikers pay by 100 percent, and others saying there would be partial reductions for staff engaging in action short of a strike, the UCU ensured that no industrial action was taken.

Several branches voted to strike. Alarmed that the strike could then spread out of their control, the UCU bureaucracy intervened and said that instead of immediate strikes being called, staff at the universities involved should instead declare yet another separate dispute. The UCU imposed this diktat, fully aware that anti-strike laws mean that organising a strike ballot and giving the employers the necessary notice would take months, by which time this term would be over.

In a desperate attempt to avert strike action in a sector of the economy that UCU General Secretary Jo Grady noted received income worth almost £41 billion, she sent a desperate letter to Universities UK CEO Alistair Jarvis aimed at "averting widespread industrial action". This was based on promising "a serious compromise on the part of UCU and its membership".

The UCU 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 Universities

Superannuation Scheme (USS) scheme, involving riskier and higher return investments, can be issued in June. The £82 billion Universities Superannuation Scheme is the UK's largest private pension fund by assets.

As last week's strike ended, Grady took to the pages of the mouthpiece of the City of London, the *Financial Times*. She complained that despite the UCU's best efforts, "we do not believe UUK [Universities UK] are serious about reaching a resolution. When UCU submitted its first set of proposals last summer, employers opposed even a small increase in their own contributions and refused to underwrite our suggested payments adequately."

Grady continued, "now, UUK seem to be guiding employers to reject our latest, pragmatic attempt to resolve the dispute. In new proposals that mark a significant compromise from our members, UCU is calling for a sensible, evidence-based valuation of the scheme's financial health as of 31 March 2022 and small one-year contribution increases for both members and employers to protect benefits..."

She pleaded, "We would like to avoid more disruptive strike action..."

No appeal is being made to students or other education workers. As one striking lecturer told WSWS reporters this week, "I think the marketisation of higher education is the biggest part of the picture of what we are fighting against and that's why we should find solidarity with the students because they are those paying the cost of this marketisation."

Instead, the UCU has launched an e-mail campaign urging its members, "If your institution is one of the 44 where strike action is taking place by UCU members over the devastating proposed 35% cuts to their hard-earned pensions, please email your [Vice Chancellor]/principal and urge them to engage with UCU."

Another plea was made Monday ahead of further talks between the UCU and the UUK being held today at the Joint Negotiating Committee. This was after being told last week by the employers that they would tolerate only a tiny extra 0.3 percentage points in terms of contributions they will pay towards pensions. Employers also insist that inflation-linked annual increases to pensions be capped at a maximum of 2.5 percent, even if CPI inflation—the lowest measure of

inflation—is above 2.5 percent. The employers also demand that the application of that cap is deferred until 2025.

The union said, "The JNC has until Monday 28 February to determine what changes to make to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension. UCU has submitted compromise proposals that were confirmed as implementable by the USS trustee which runs the scheme. UUK must decide whether to push ahead with cuts of 35% to university staff's guaranteed retirement income or whether it is willing to work with UCU and resolve the pension dispute."

This has only one endgame: another serious defeat for higher education workers which will have major ramifications for workers everywhere as the Johnson government ends all COVID restrictions and escalates its offensive against pensions, pay, terms and conditions.

Higher education workers must turn to the formation of rank-and-file committees, organised independently of the UCU in every workplace. The broadest turn must be made to other education workers and students, over the heads of the UCU and NUS, to reverse the decades-long attack on jobs and livelihoods and halt the marketisation and privatisation of education at all levels.

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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