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Strikers at the University of Manchester speak on working conditions

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to striking lecturers on picket lines on Tuesday, just before brutal pension cuts were forced through by employers at a meeting of the Universities Superannuation Scheme’s Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC).

At the University of Manchester, the University and College Union (UCU) called workers out on strike only over the “Four Fights” dispute. The UCU provides an essential service to the employers by separating the struggle against the evisceration of pay, terms and conditions, from that to defend pensions.

The WSWs spoke to two workers, Poppy and Santiago, who explained their reasons for striking and the difficulties they face on campus as the pandemic continues with all restrictions lifted. The virus, and subsequent variants, are now able to spread freely among over 2 million students and tens of thousands of university workers.

Poppy said, “I’m a PGR [Postgraduate Researcher], so I can see how it’s affecting my colleagues’ and also my future as well.”

Asked whether they had been affected by the issues of casualisation and workload, Santiago said, “It’s not only casualisation, right? But also lack of investment, and lack of opportunities in terms of getting positions as a career scholar. It’s very difficult to see a path that provides security and a decent salary.”

There was, they said, a natural link between the ‘Four Fights’ and pensions disputes, as “It’s not only

employment security, but also old-age security.”

Asked what was motivating the lack of investment in staff by universities, Santiago said, “They invest their money in financial markets, and they’ve become like profit-making machines, and they invest in the areas in which they believe they can make profits and where they can excel in terms of rankings,” but “not for us in humanities and social sciences of course...”

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Discussing the war drive against Russia by the major imperialist powers, and the United States’s ratcheting up of tensions in order to divert attention from a mounting domestic crisis, Santiago said, “The government here is doing exactly the same, it’s not so different.”

Poppy and Santiago opposed the Conservative government’s announcement the previous day ending remaining restrictions on the spread of COVID-19, as well as self-isolation support payments. Santiago said, “Of course, and there won’t be free tests so their statistics won’t reflect anything because people won’t be testing.” Poppy rejected the claims that the Omicron variant meant the end of the pandemic, saying “Who knows what the next variant will be? It is disproportionately going to affect poor people and

disabled people, who are made to be in poverty due to the lack of support.”

Poppy linked the campaign to force workers back to workplaces with an agenda in which employees are “further disempowered because they’re having to work so many hours, and their whole life becomes working, and you can’t come together because you don’t even have the means or the time. Our system makes sure of that.

“And that’s why they didn’t like it when people worked from home because you can have more freedom and flexibility and realise there’s more to life. If you can go to an appointment and make up the time later, you realise ‘maybe I don’t need to be in these confines of 8 until 6:30 or 7pm. That’s why they were like ‘get back to work! get back to work!’, so we can monitor you and make sure you’re doing what you’re meant to be doing.”

Asked whether there had been pressure from the university to return to in-person teaching, Poppy replied “They’ve stopped dual-delivery now, so that means that students can’t learn from home unless there’s extreme circumstances for why they can’t come in. Whereas last semester you could opt to study from home, so as a teaching assistant you could do Zoom and in-person. You felt like you were catering both for international students and disabled students, but this semester is 100 percent in-person.”

On the removal of other health measures she said, “There’s no implementation of masks. When I teach, I’m the only one wearing a mask, so there’s zero protection.” Since masks were made optional for students, “I don’t necessarily tend to ask, because it’s a lot of emotional labour to have to ask someone to wear a mask and have them potentially be confrontational.”

Poppy said of the new pandemic policy that “[Chief Medical Officer] Chris Whitty even said yesterday ‘I urge you to still self-isolate when you’ve got COVID’, like you need to stay at home if you’re symptomatic and have COVID, which is the opposite of what [Prime Minister] Boris Johnson said about five minutes earlier, so it’s not driven by any science.”

Poppy was concerned about the burden of Long COVID given the unrestricted spread of the virus. “They’re really underestimating the power of chronic illness. They want a ‘strong workforce’ and you want

everyone to be back, but they’re not going to be strong and they’re not going to be working if they’re chronically ill. Because that’s essentially what you’re allowing to happen.

“For example, with chronic fatigue syndrome, people disbelieved that for years and people have been championing for their rights. And Long COVID is essentially chronic fatigue, it starts with post-viral syndrome for a lot of people. And so all this is going to do is rip through the workforce and have the opposite effect of what they want.”



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