

UK university workers finish 10 days of strikes against pension decimation and attacks on pay and conditions

Our reporters
2 March 2022

Tens of thousands of lecturers in higher education (HE) continued strikes from Monday to Wednesday this week. The action began on February 14 with a five-day strike, with a further two days of action the following week, taking the total to 10 days.

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

Last week, the Universities Superannuation Scheme's (USS) joint negotiating committee (JNC) voted through massive attacks on pensions, meaning workers in the higher education sector losing tens of thousands of pounds. Many of those striking expressed their opposition on social media, demanding that the University and College Union (UCU) respond by escalating the action.

UCU leader Jo Grady responded by telling members, "These cuts may take effect from April, but they are not irreversible and this dispute is far from over." Grady said next steps would be decided at the February 25 meeting of the union's higher education committee (HEC). No further action has been announced by the UCU since.

The UCU has enforced a divide and rule policy, splitting of the pensions dispute from what it terms the "Four Fights" over pay, casualisation, etc. As a result, the final three days of strikes this week were purely over the issues of pay and conditions—just days after the employers imposed staggering pension cuts on hundreds of thousands of workers in the USS.

Manchester

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to strikers and students on picket lines at a number of universities on Wednesday. At the University of Manchester, lecturer Tom explained that universities UK had attempted to justify its pension cuts based on a valuation of the fund's assets

conducted in March 2020. Tom rejected this ruse: "Anyone looking at it from an objective perspective would say 'they're insane', there's no resemblance to reality in why you would have a valuation at the start of a pandemic and not revalue it. So it shows that the Joint Negotiating Committee [JNC] independent chair is not independent, I think."

Tom said the structure of the JNC "itself was a compromise to end the 2018 strikes, when we could have gone on to strike more, we could have won more. That was under the old union leadership." This was a reference to the rank-and-file revolt of UCU members that year.

In the current round of strikes, Tom said, "Our union had made a compromise offer which had cost me more money, which I didn't vote for and I don't agree with." He wanted to broaden the dispute over pensions, calling for workers in other unions and working in other parts of the HE sector to join the strikes. "The last thing we should do is accept anything less than the compromise position over pensions. The compromise position, I wouldn't vote for it."

"I think stuff like a marking boycott would be part of it [broadening the strike]. Occupation by students—students are very important in this. At the University of Manchester there have been some great occupations about how they were treated over COVID and rent strikes and stuff, we need to see that again."

Tom continued, "I think if they [the UCU] go for a marking boycott, the management would go for 100 percent pay deductions, so you might as well just go on strike anyway." In contrast to the limited 10 days of strike action called this term, "it would have to be an indefinite strike, and I don't think they're going to call that. There's going to be some kind of crappy compromise between escalation and defeat."

At Manchester Metropolitan University, management had threatened to continue docking 100 percent of the pay of workers who had been on strike until they agreed to

reschedule teaching which would have taken place during the strike.

During a rally of workers at the local universities, our reporters spoke to James, an MMU research fellow. He said “I think it’s important for us to come together ... and make a case for a fairer, more just, more inclusive higher education. I think it’s important about the kind of research that we can do, the kind of students we can teach, and the lived experiences that we can relate to.”

James said he thought the 100 percent pay deductions were “a punitive kind of approach. I feel that often it backfires.” He added “I think it’s quite a new tactic, to make strikes more about individuals and drive a divisive line in collective bargaining.”

When a previous vice-chancellor took punitive measures against a strike, “I wouldn’t say it radicalised me, but it did kind of did entrench that division between employee and management.” The management only say “it’s ‘our university’ when they want you to work harder, when they want you to do all these things.” James added, “I think it’s unfair, I think it’s unjust, but this is the kind of academia that we’re trying to challenge”.

MMU workers are part of the Teachers’ Pension Scheme, so “we haven’t lost like £250,000 in our pension,” said James. “I think our pension probably isn’t as generous as the USS was, but it’s more generous than the USS is now. I have got friends at Russell Group universities [24 leading institutions] and they’re absolutely outraged.”

Sociology lecturer Lillian has worked at the University of Manchester for seven years. She told the WSWS it took her five years to get a permanent post. She joined the strike to fight casualisation and the attack on pensions. Going forward in the fight against attacks on pay, pensions and conditions, Lillian said, “I believe in collective action.”

“Based on the University Superannuation Scheme calculator, my pension has been halved. They did this at a time when it looked like the scheme was in deficit, so it should be revalued. It’s shocking how much has been clawed back from staff, knowing how much money the University has. One reason we work in Universities is because of the pensions, not the wages.”

Lillian added, “It’s always us and our pensions that suffer. It’s important we invest in people and good education. How can we do that if the university is investing in property?”

“The university is so removed from our ideals. We want to do research and teach. I went to university in 1997. I paid no tuition fees. It’s a different world now. And they’ve changed the deal on repaying tuition fees. It changes the language we speak. Everything is: how much is it going to cost?”

Sam, a philosophy student from Salford University, said,

“I’ve come along to support the lecturers because an attack on them is the same as an attack on students. Education has become a business. I’d read that the level of income before you start repaying your student loan has decreased. That will have a big impact. Also, they’re going to get rid of courses like philosophy, because courses have to be good for business.”

Asked about the escalating war in the Ukraine, he said, “I don’t support Putin because he has expansionist ideas, but I don’t support NATO either. NATO’s been attacking Eastern Europe. The way forward isn’t war. Nobody wants war.”

Sociology lecturer Clara shared her views about the war: “It’s a lie that the war in the Ukraine is the first war in Europe since 1945. What about the wars in Yugoslavia? NATO is not a peaceful organisation. When governments and the media say this, they must think most people are stupid and can’t remember.”

Liverpool

Abby, a lecturer at the University of Liverpool, said, “Tory government union rules have made it very difficult to get people together and strike ... lots of us can’t afford to strike but still are. People are being mistreated and are frightened.”

Ayyaz, a lecturer in Human Geography, told our reporters, “I support the strike and any action whole heartedly.” Asked his view on intensification of the conflict between Russia and NATO, he said, “On one side there is the eastward expansion and belligerence of NATO, and on the other side there is an oligarchy. Capitalism is driven by its own contradictions.”

Education workers must urgently turn to the formation of rank-and-file committees, which can organise and act independently of the UCU. A joint offensive of educators in the higher, further and school-age sectors, in alliance with students, is required to defeat the offensive of the employers backed by the government, proceeding with its marketisation agenda and intent on clawing back the hundreds of billions shelled out to the corporations and the super-rich during the pandemic. This is the programme of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. We call on educators to contact us, attend our meetings and receive our regular newsletter.



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