

# UK university workers speak on higher education dispute

**Our reporters**  
**3 March 2022**

Tens of thousands of higher education (HE) workers completed a 10 day strike following action from Monday to Wednesday this week. The action began on February 14 with a five-day stoppage, followed by two days of action the following week.

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.

WSWS reporters spoke to strikers and students at universities nationwide this week, including in London.

**Tom Pursell**, a lecturer in the Department of European and International Studies at King's College London, said, "Today's action is part of the ongoing strike against the pension cuts and against what's called the Four Fights, including casualisation, gender and ethnicity pay gaps. So, there's two fights, the pension and there's also a broader struggle against the conditions of university working life.

"It's a broader struggle against the marketisation of higher education, so it's not really something we can resolve on our own. It's about a broader kind of problem with the fees structure, the conditions of work, so I think it's going to be an ongoing dispute for many years, with the nature of the market and education.

"During COVID we were asked to completely switch our teaching strategies to online delivery, and we all did that with commitment to our students. It took a huge amount of work to deliver lectures online and to transfer all the material online. So we worked extremely hard and that is obviously in the middle of a prior dispute and this dispute. It felt like it was a kind of intensification of the working

process whereby we were working evenings and weekends as a norm. We worked well beyond contract. It was an intensification of ongoing processes where to do our job we need to work many more hours than our contracts actually employ us for.

"I think the fight's not over and I don't think Jo Grady speaks for all of the union branches. Our branch went to the High Court and lodged an appeal with the judge to sue the pension scheme regarding the management and the calculations. I feel pretty certain that whatever the central leadership is saying the fight isn't over.

"That seems to be the general mood of all the members here, that there will be escalation. Because the kind of figures of what they're taking in their pension cuts are so egregious and large it's mobilising many more people who perhaps wouldn't normally be so enthusiastic about the strike.

"That's why we're here today with Unison as well, with the people at work that clean our buildings. So they're part of our struggle as well and we see them as allies. Institutions like universities have a bigger social responsibility than simply being run as market-led organisations."

**Pirla** told the WSWS, "I'm a student from the Dominican Republic. I'm here on a scholarship and now our scholarship is having problems to pay so I have to look for a job. Finding a job is difficult because education is very expensive and so we have to take out a loan to pay for it and then try to get a job to pay the loans. So I think it's a broken system.

"For one a year in my university is £17,000 for the Masters. And then as I'm not from here, so I have to pay for accommodation, my food, transport, clothes and all that. I'm supporting the strike to have free education and to have a better system that actually works for everyone."

**Sarah Hammond** is the president of the Keele postgraduate association. She explained, "There's only two dedicated postgraduate associations in the UK; Keele and York. We work quite closely together to ensure that the postgraduate researchers that I represent, both students and staff because I represent postgraduate researchers who are staff, have a decent deal when they come to work—to make sure that they're not threatened with casualisation of their contracts, to make sure that they are seen as being on a par with any of the other staff that work at the university.

"We're a very unusual cohort and people are like 'oh well, we don't know whether to treat you as staff or we don't know whether to treat you as students'. It's about listening to postgraduate voices and making sure that the things that they want are the things that we see at the university.

"I started as an undergraduate in 2010 so I've seen the impact of

marketisation over 12 years. I was on the student strikes in 2010 when tuition fees rose from £3,000 to £9,000 a year, so all I've seen really is an increase in costs for students and students aren't getting any more out of education. They're not getting what they want out of education. So students are being asked pay more money while lecturers' pay and working conditions have gone down. Students are essentially paying more and receiving less, much like lecturers at the moment."

**A security worker at Kings College London**, said, "The work environment is not inclusive. There's a lot of bullying from management, including racist bullying.

"A lot of security and cleaning workers are taking management to court. People are scared to speak out, there's intimidation and it's been going on for some time. That's why we are out here today. We are showing solidarity with the lecturers also. We want fairness and equal opportunity. If you do a night shift they won't give you night allowance.

"The night shift is extremely difficult. Recently we were working for a company called CIS but now we are working for in house security. There were so many people who got COVID, but management did nothing. The lecturers were working from home but we had to come in.

"For an international institution the university should be doing better to protect worker's safety. Me and my colleagues have fought a long time, but now I'm getting to the age when I don't want to do it any longer.

"Unison [largest public sector union] has not been doing enough. They have lawyers, they need to represent us properly. Sometimes I call them, but they don't come. If they pulled their finger out they could solve this straight away. Five security workers here died of COVID. If you're sick you should isolate but they keep calling us into work. The union has to seriously do more. I only get help from them if I've been hassling them. This job is very stressful. If management acted properly then the stress levels would come down.

"There's racist bullying directly from managers, managers of security and managers of cleaning. They should be either dismissed or trained. King's College didn't train them properly. The union isn't doing enough. There's even racism inside the union.

"I've been trying to make a proposal that King's College should create a council composed of lecturers, teachers, cleaning and security staff so they can come to the table and discuss these issues properly. We know that the unions sometimes side with management, so the issue can't be solved by the unions.

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"Everyone who works here contributes no matter what field they work in, including students. We need to protect the legacy of the university because if we didn't then there'd be no students, and if there were no students then we'd be out of a job. They should respect all the workers in the college. We feel like we're selling our dignity. Management is just interested in profit. There's a common struggle by all the workers here. Margaret Thatcher dissolved the unions in the 80s because they were stronger back then, but now they do very little except take dues from members."

**Another security guard** said, "During the pandemic managers didn't provide face masks. They were given out after a couple of months. We didn't get the opportunity to be furloughed. Others did. I drove to work so I wasn't on public transport. I lost my father last year and 4-5 members of staff died.

"We do night shift, and our shift pattern is seven days on three off, seven on four off. We do 84 hours over seven days. We asked for night shift allowance, but they are not looking to help us. We should be doing days and then off, then we go to nights, or we go days nights together, all at once, which is no good for your health.

"We have 9 teams that do seven on three off, that's a lot of teams. Our main demands today are London pay weighting, shift allowance, and because of our colour we don't get promoted. We have to wait longer for promotion.

"Everything is going up now food, travel. That's why we are demanding more now. Other workers can get shift and travel allowance. Security workers and cleaners don't get that opportunity. We are on permanent contracts. They use agency staff who are paid less, and they do more than 20 hours which they are not supposed to.

"The workers are fed up. Some of them want overtime but they don't get it, because they use agency staff which is cheaper, but they are not fully trained. So we have to train them, and then they never come back, so it's a waste of training."

**Johannes** works at King's College in German language education. He said, "Today is officially the 4 Fights dispute of the UCU about pay, casualisation, workload and the gender/ethnicity pay gap. We want to make sure we don't lose more of our pay which has gone down in real terms a lot over the last 10 or more years, and the workload has increased at the same time significantly. There's still a lot of academic members of staff who are on short-term contracts, who never know how many hours of teaching they will have or how long they will be employed.

"These are things that have concerned us a long time, we've been fighting a long time, and it's now terminating in this longer action of strikes.

"There is also the pension issue which we are not on strike for at this time. That fight has been ongoing since 2018. We had a strike shortly before COVID hit. We put it on pause, but these issues haven't gone away. If anything they have become worse during COVID with teaching online.

"It's been a challenge. We had to get used to different ways of teaching, and because we had to do it overnight, we were not prepared and had to do it very quickly and adapt, which put extra stress on us. But we don't see this being rewarded by the employers."

**Vee Samas**, a student at Cardiff University, said, "A lot of people are not happy with how they are being treated, and they are taking the opportunity in their own hands, making sure that their voices are heard.

"I think it's exploiting the students to the point where they are using them to get money to cover up their mistakes basically, not allowing students the same fair opportunities they did 30 years ago, which isn't a long time. It's affecting students mentally, and physically."



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