

UK: The UCU's right and 'left' factions are preventing an effective fight by lecturers

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The University and College Union (UCU) has begun balloting its members on taking further industrial action over cuts to pensions and worsening pay and conditions.

This follows the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) agreeing to substantial pension cuts, which will come into effect from April 1 and see a typical lecturer losing up to 35 percent of the value of their pension.

Higher education workers have struck every year over pensions since 2018, when the largest strike in the history of the sector was held. That strike was sold out by the union after four weeks of industrial action.

University workers should take stock of their experiences with the UCU. Following the pattern of earlier actions, the next round of strikes from March 21 is to be limited to a small groups of universities, with stoppages restricted to just five days. Moreover, action over pensions is being kept separate from stoppages protesting pay and conditions.

It has become clear that the UCU bureaucracy is opposed to a major struggle breaking out in the higher education sector, and workers are confronted with the need to oppose both the employers and their own union.

One major obstacle to securing the pay, pensions and conditions of university workers is the pernicious role played by the UCU Left, whose perspective amounts to putting pressure on the union bureaucracy to force it to conduct slightly more militant action.

At the meeting of the union's Higher Education Committee (HEC) at the end of February, the UCU Left merely called for nine days of strikes rather than the five days eventually agreed. The role of this faction, politically led by the Socialist Workers Party, has been to defend the control of the unions over the working class. They do this no matter how many times the

unions meekly accept job losses or impose wage cuts, claiming this is the only way to avoid even greater reductions.

The UCU Left is in no way independent of the bureaucracy, being intimately tied to the union structures at local and national levels.

The faction held a majority on the HEC until 2020, which did not result in any challenge to the bankrupt perspective of the bureaucracy as it sought to grind down the fighting spirit of university workers through a series of ineffectual and isolated actions.

Following the sell-out of the 2018 pension fight, the UCU membership rebelled against the right-wing leadership of then General Secretary Sally Hunt, resulting in the election of Jo Grady to the post in 2019. This was hailed by the UCU Left as "a leap to the left." It enthusiastically wrote, the "UCU Left look forward to working with Jo Grady to transform UCU into a democratic fighting union that can send shivers down the spine of every employer."

Rather than the employers shivering, it is university workers who are being forced to feel the cold.

The aim of the UCU Left in 2018 was not to lead a rebellion against a sell-out, but to ensure that the rebellion already underway was kept within the confines of the union structures. While university workers denounced the deal and forced Hunt to backtrack, the UCU Left insisted that even a "shoddy compromise" would be "an important step forward".

The UCU Left sought to paint a rosy picture, in which the industrial "action is working", while knowing a sell-out was being discussed in UCU headquarters behind closed doors. Only after it was bombarded with texts, emails and tweets calling for *#NoCapitulation* did the UCU Left change position and advocate rejecting the deal.

Despite Hunt being forced out, control of the pensions dispute was left in the union's hands.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, this only meant delaying, not defeating the pension cuts. Even with every manoeuvre hailed as a “democratisation” of the union by the UCU Left in the subsequent four years, above all the replacement of Hunt by Grady, the employers have succeeded in forcing through exactly what they wanted on pensions.

The UCU Left seeks to chloroform university workers to the bitter lessons of this defeat. While it belatedly acknowledges there is no prospect of Grady leading UCU members to a victory in the pensions dispute, nor the “Four Fights” over pay, workloads, equality and casualisation, it calls for them to follow exactly the same policies it advocated following Hunt being ousted: replace a few officials, establish a few new bureaucratic procedures, and apply “pressure” to the leaders.

The UCU Left does not want a reckoning with the union bureaucracy, but a place in its ranks with all the many privileges this brings.

Those working in higher education occupy a significant position in the economy, and if unified outside the trade unions could contribute powerfully to a broader fightback against the offensive on workers' living conditions that has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research commissioned by the employers' body Universities UK (UUK) in 2021 found that 815,000 jobs across the economy depended, directly or indirectly, on universities. UCU-commissioned analysis in 2020 found that a third of workers said the local university was important to their own job, indicating the strategic position a fight by those in higher education could play alongside other workers.

This objective strength can only be deployed effectively once workers in higher and further education establish organisations under their own control and independent of the trade unions.

Such rank-and-file committees would bear no resemblance to the multi-layered bureaucratic monstrosity advocated by the UCU Left. They would fight to mobilise workers and students against the marketised system of education, which has seen students herded onto campuses rife with COVID-19 as cash cows to pay rent, and casualised, insecure work

become widespread. They would fight to link the issues facing university and college workers with those of other workers being driven into struggle by the cost-of-living crisis.

This is the perspective for which the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have consistently fought against the pseudo-left opportunists such as the UCU Left, who seek to subordinate workers to the deadly embrace of the union bureaucracy. The organisation of such rank-and-file committees must be fought for, and workers in higher and further education should make contact and get involved today.



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