

UK: University and College Union shelves national strikes for a year

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1 May 2022

Following four weeks of strikes in February and March over a long-running dispute over pay and conditions in UK higher education (HE), University and College Union (UCU) General Secretary Jo Grady, has published a 38-page “new strategy and plan of action”.

With RPI inflation at 9 percent and the employers’ association offering only a 2.75 percent pay rise for most HE workers, the “new strategy” is to tell UCU members to stand down and suffer.

The report is littered with bombastic rhetoric, introducing “a more radical strategy to win” and insisting “This isn’t just a ‘fight’, or even four ‘fights’. It is a war.” Grady warns, “If we keep doing the same thing with only minor tactical tweaks, we will not win.” But the “same thing” that will not be repeated is any industrial action.

After complaining that the employers are “refusing to give our union anything resembling a victory” to its members, Grady comes to the point: the union needs to recruit new members and build up its resources, which “means not taking further action in the new six month mandate.”

The trade unions have spent decades developing strikebreaking tools to suppress the class struggle, and Grady proposes to bring every single one of them to bear against higher education workers. In the introduction she proposes to overrule the strike votes of members in 37 universities and suspend disputes until new ballots are arranged in April 2023.

Regarding motions submitted to the April 20 special higher education conference, Grady endorsed those calling for bureaucratic “mapping exercises,” an “online consultation” and other marketing activities to draw in members to pay dues but delay any fight for better conditions. Another motion backed by Grady proposes to invite the Universities and Colleges Employers Association to conciliation talks at the government’s Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service. The role of ACAS “conciliation” historically is to work out a deal favourable to the employers which will be promoted as a “reasonable compromise” by the unions.

Another technique used to block any fight is fruitless appeals to the Labour Party. Citing as a positive example the fact that pay deals in the FE sector in Wales since 2019 have been above inflation, with UCU figures showing an average annual pay increase of 2.75 percent from August 2018 to August 2021 while annual price rises averaged 2.5 percent, Grady celebrates how “This has been achieved without industrial action—thanks in part to the fact that there is a Labour government in Wales and the UCU Wales office has developed a strong relationship with policymakers.”

This is the same right-wing party currently hiring scabs in a dispute with refuse collection lorry drivers in Coventry, while 2.75 percent has been adopted as the employers’ benchmark in England. The employers portray this as a concession because in January, emboldened by their corporatist relationship with the UCU, they only offered 1.75 percent.

Indicating that the UCU will take up no fight against plans to complete the transformation of universities into profit-making centres, Grady writes, “The Tory government’s plans for higher education also present a massive potential obstacle to success... The domestic and public funding landscape is going to get worse in the foreseeable future, not better,”

The union bureaucracy specialises in presenting sellouts as decisive victories. Grady highlights “successes” she hopes to emulate. After boosting the pitiful deal in Wales, she refers to an “improved pay offer” won in Northern Ireland this January, and “improved offers” accepted at numerous colleges across England. The deal accepted in Northern Ireland was for a mere 2 percent for 2020 and 2 percent for 2021, a significant real-terms cut. After Weymouth College in England offered a 2.2 percent pay rise, Grady called for others to follow its example.

Strikes that UCU members have voted for throughout the USS pension dispute have been throttled by Grady in the same way as her widely despised predecessor Sally Hunt, who stood down following a mass rebellion by lecturers after her attempt to foist a rotten deal on them. After the

employers succeeded in forcing through their long-sought pension cuts in February, followed by just five days of strikes called by the UCU, many workers are drawing the conclusion that there can be no serious struggle waged within this organisation.

Grady felt the need to acknowledge the impact of the union's long history of betrayals. Despite over a decade of real-terms pay cuts, "only a small minority of staff eligible to be UCU members currently are UCU members," she writes. Only around 30 percent of eligible workers were members of the UCU, far lower than the average union density in the public sector, which was 51.9 percent in 2020.

Confirming that the vast majority of HE workers have no confidence in the union, Grady wrote that in the 2021 ballot over pay and conditions, counting those who were not union members, "The total across all branches in the ballot was 9% of eligible staff voting for strike action" and that even many of the branches which joined strikes "saw 10% or less of their eligible staff voting to strike."

It is especially difficult for the UCU to recruit the most exploited workers in HE, who have experienced deals announced by the union as "victories" that left the system of fixed-term contracts and low pay intact. Grady admitted, "UCU does not have high density amongst precariously employed and lower paid staff. If anything, membership demographics appear to be shifting more towards the higher paid and more securely employed end of the spectrum as time goes on."

The inability to recruit poses a problem for the union bureaucracy. In the year ending August 31, 2021, the UCU pulled in over £22 million (£22,173,779) from members "contributions and subscription." *Over half* of this income (53.8 percent) was creamed off by the union bureaucracy in terms of "remuneration and expenses of staff" (£11,948,283). Over £9 million (£9,028,314) went on the salaries and wages of the union's officialdom. Grady coins in £140,213 in basic salary and pension contribution, plus expenses, putting her among the highest earners in Britain.

Grady sees workers outside the union only as a source of potential income, to be targeted with "a programme of properly planned, properly resourced, proactive recruitment" while the expensive matter of calling strikes is suspended.

Grady's rival faction in the bureaucracy, the UCU Left, politically led by the Socialist Workers Party, offers no genuine opposition to the undermining of HE workers' struggles. While referring to the new plan as a "surrender document", the UCU Left continued to bolster a discredited UCU, writing, "Reading this document, you wouldn't have thought that the union had just recorded overwhelming majorities for strike action and ASOS [action short of a

strike]."

Before Grady published her new plan, and after having pretended to oppose the previous strategy of isolated regional strikes, the UCU Left suggested the low turnout in the ballot may be *beneficial*, as, "Hitting a minority of institutions can work to our advantage by causing splits among the employers."

After Grady published the plan, a UCU Left statement went to extraordinary lengths to justify why members were not voting in strike ballots, declaring, "Members do not vote for a variety of reasons, as anyone who has engaged with a Get the Vote Out (GTVO) campaign can report, from lost papers to house moves and pre-arranged leave."

The UCU Left and SWP only represent rival lower-ranking bureaucrats fighting for more lucrative positions. Candidates backed by the UCU Left in February's elections to the National Executive Committee (NEC) were in large part branch secretaries, chairs and presidents.

At its April 20 "Four Fights conference" UCU officials voted down a motion calling for "UK-wide escalation of the ongoing strike action to indefinite strike action." Instead, they backed a further 10 days of strikes to be held in "late May," i.e., at the end of term. The UCU has still not named the date for any action.

As a harmless alternative to industrial action, Grady's faction is for an exam marking boycott "in the coming months." For all the UCU Left's bluster, they only add the proviso that a marking boycott should be funded by "Members in non-striking branches" who "would be more than willing to contribute to sponsor colleagues."

Members not taking part in a marking boycott should be asked to donate one day's pay each week to the union, whose funds would therefore be safeguarded! Their other proposals is "for a ballot over the summer" (when everyone is on holiday) that "could see us all ready to take on the employers right at the start of the autumn term."

No faction is going to emerge from within the UCU to remake it into a fighting organisation. The only way to defeat the unrelenting assault on pay, pensions and conditions in higher education is for workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent from the UCU. Such groups must unify their struggles with other workers and students throughout the HE/FE sectors.



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