

University and College Union sabotages college strike in northwest England

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On May 18, lecturers at five Further Education (FE) colleges in northwest England held a one-day strike in opposition to a 2 percent pay offer. As part of the same dispute, thousands of staff at Manchester College walked out for 24 hours on May 20.

Since the stoppages, the lecturers are working to contract, providing no cover for absent colleagues or vacant posts, and not rescheduling missed classes.

FE staff are demanding a pay rise to meet the cost-of-living crisis, yet the University and College Union (UCU) only requests an increase of 8.5 percent—below the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) rate of 9 percent and the Retail Price Index (RPI) rate of 11.1 percent. Neither does this compensate for pay erosion over the years, resulting in an estimated 35 percent decrease in real terms since 2009.

The first strike involved 900 staff who teach 50,000 students at Burnley College, City of Liverpool College, Hopwood Hall, Nelson and Colne College Group and Oldham College. Thousands of staff struck at Manchester College, the largest such institution in the UK.

Six colleges were initially due to strike on May 18 but, on the eve of the stoppage, the UCU at Bury College called off action after negotiating a deal with management at the government's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). UCU North West reported on Twitter, "Bury UCU wins 6 percent pay rise, 3 percent plus £1,000 lump sum. Members voted by 75 percent to accept." In response, a UCU member asked the obvious question, "Is the lump sum consolidated?", to which he received no reply.

A UCU press release said the union "is demanding the other colleges follow Bury's example and make improved pay offers to meet the cost of living crisis." It made no reference to the fact that the deal was below

its claimed "at least 8.5 percent" pay demand. At a Zoom rally held the day of the walkout, UCU President Jo Grady declared the "amazing deal" at Bury College a "victory".

There are over 370 FE colleges in England but the UCU is opposed to mobilizing its members in a unified fight over pay and conditions, just as it was in the recent Higher Education dispute over pensions, pay and conditions. After calling a series of sporadic and dwindling strikes in the new year, the union announced its intention to shelve HE national strikes until 2023.

Only two more days of strikes have been announced by the UCU at the northwest colleges, both for the end of summer term, on June 7 and 10, when they will be almost ineffectual.

At Friday's strike rally at Manchester College's Openshaw campus, UCU Manchester College branch secretary Lesley Higginbottom made clear the union was ready to negotiate another below-inflation pay deal. "We have been to ACAS with management ... Other colleges who were out on strike on Wednesday have received offers and are negotiating on them. Basically, we want what Bury have got and we want it now."

Jay McKenna, regional secretary of the North West Trades Union Congress, peddled the fiction that the unions are negotiating deals which protect the livelihoods of their members. "Workers are winning across the North West. We've seen that at Bury this just week. Unite have been in dispute [at CHEP] for five months, workers have been on strike, but they won ... it's only through trade unions taking action that will make a real difference."

The CHEP dispute, after a determined fight by the workforce, ended with a union sellout. The "14% inflation beating deal" announced by Unite was in

reality a real terms pay cut of 9 percent over two years.

Strikers from Manchester College who attended the rally told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters how their miserable salary and workload is making it near impossible to stay in a job they otherwise love.

Geoff, who has been teaching for 20 years said, “Can you afford to be a teacher? I am working this weekend to supplement my pay, because I have to...

“A lot of people say that they can’t afford to go on strike, but can they afford to stay here? When inflation was 2 percent and your pay offer was 1 percent it probably wasn’t as acute, but now inflation is 9 percent or maybe 11 percent, a 1 percent pay rise doesn’t even touch it.

“Do they want to lose staff, especially in FE and HE? If I have to leave, that disadvantages students. I could set my own business up. I could be charging rich people £50 an hour to do Cardiac Rehabilitation in Wilmslow, as my background is exercise science, but I enjoy working here. But then I have kids myself, and paying the bills is important.”

Michael said, “We have lost people from our department: two at the end of last year and one this year who was only in the job for about eight weeks because of the way it was managed. The job is more stressful than when I started. You want to stay in teaching and want to keep helping your students. There should be a reward for that, but it doesn’t happen.”

Col Pritchard, who has worked at the college for 18 months, explained, “We have had 10 years of below-inflation pay rates. This pay year since November they decided not to offer us anything at all, at a time when everyone is struggling with rising fuel costs, and inflation is going through the roof.”

He continued, “We’re talking about an education service that’s being run as a business. So, they don’t want to pay out what they don’t have to. It’s publicly funded, taxpayer’s money. They have tried to bring in other conditions in terms of efficiency. We can’t work any harder than we are doing now. There’s only so many hours in the day.

“We are contracted to work for 37 hours, but we put more in to get students through. I wouldn’t like to put a figure on it because it disheartens me, it’s that bad.”

Employers are going on the offensive throughout FE and the entire education sector. In southwest London, staff began a five-day strike at Richmond upon Thames

College on Monday in opposition to management threats to fire 127 tutors and force them to reapply for their jobs on inferior terms and conditions.

Lecturers at Furness college near Lancaster, which is part of Lancaster University, also walked out on May 18, after rejecting a one percent pay offer. That Lancaster University is only a few miles from the striking FE colleges in the north west highlights the UCU’s determination to keep struggles walled off.

Educators fighting academisation, poor pay, attacks on pensions and unbearable workloads confront not just the employers but their partners in the education unions. The unions’ collaboration was also essential to the government’s unsafe reopening of schools, colleges and universities—major vectors for the spread of COVID—before the pandemic was suppressed. The result was catastrophic, with the virus killing at least 570 educators (figure only known up to December 2020) and 183 children, and incapacitating thousands more through Long COVID. A recent investigation by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) into the tragic COVID death of Donna Coleman found her employer Burnley College did not take “all reasonably practicable measures to control COVID-19.”

A unified struggle of all educators over pay and conditions and for a safe learning environment requires new organisations, independent of the trade unions and based on a socialist programme. All cuts to education, including the decimation of adult and part-time learning, must be reversed. Billions must be made available, not for NATO’s proxy war in Ukraine, but for a fully resourced education and health system.

To take this struggle forward, join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



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