

UCU union undermines Further Education college strikes in north west England with below-inflation deals

“We should be on national strike.”

Margot Miller
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Lecturers at four Further Education (FE) colleges in north west England walked out on June 7 and June 10 in opposition to a miserable 2 percent pay offer.

The Manchester College, Burnley College, Oldham College, the City of Liverpool College and Hopwood Hall College were previously shut by strikes on May 18. Lecturers at The Manchester College, with 1,700 staff and almost 23,000 students on roll, also walked out on May 20.

Six colleges including the above planned to strike on May 18 but the University and College Union (UCU) at Bury College broke ranks after negotiating a deal with management. UCU North West reported on Twitter, “Bury UCU wins 6 percent pay rise, 3 percent plus £1,000 lump sum.”

With RPI inflation at 11.1 percent, this represents a substantial wage cut. Neither does it meet the union’s own below-inflation demand for an 8.5 percent rise. The UCU’s response to what general secretary Jo Grady described as an “amazing” deal was to encourage other colleges to emulate Bury’s example.

On the eve of the June 6 action the UCU at Hopwood Hall College negotiated a similar below-inflation deal, accepting 7.5 percent. UCU regional official Martyn Moss said, “We welcome Hopwood Hall College’s pay offer to our members... We are calling on the four colleges... to look to Hopwood Hall and Bury college.”

FE colleges offer courses to students including adults who missed out on gaining academic qualifications at school, as well as an array of vocational modules. Students tend to be from working-class backgrounds. Workers in this sector are facing the catastrophic cost of living crisis after having seen their pay drastically eroded,

to the point that they earn £9,000 less a year than school teachers.

Strikers speaking to WSWs reporters explained that their dispute is as much about working conditions and the quality of education they are able to offer their students as it is about pay.

Malcolm, who has been teaching a vehicle technician course at Oldham College for four years, said, “There are more and more students and less and less time to support them due to workload. There’s a lot of planning and administration work. It’s not all about a pay rise, it’s about conditions, the extra hours you put in. Just going into college, I do an extra 15 hours a week.”

Monica, a Manchester College lecturer in the supported learning team, voiced a widespread concern. “Education is becoming a commercial venture,” she said. “Our CEO’s on £216,000 a year. It’s all about the financialization of education. Like car companies, we think they sell cars, but they sell finance. Education is not the primary function here. The college’s motto is ‘Industry Excellence.’ They extract funding where they can. We are the biggest college in Europe, with different funding streams.”

Colleges, she added, are “run by CEOs on large salaries with big bonuses. At the other end we’ve got tutors and teachers on low pay. We are expected to do unpaid extra hours. The rate of stress is rising. There has to be some redrawing of lines on what education is for young people. It’s a basic right.

“What else is working right? GP [general practitioner] services? Try taking a flight from Manchester airport! So many lost their jobs there during the pandemic. Look at transport, the cost-of-living crisis! What is working?

What do they mean by a living wage? What are affordable homes? The government doesn't care, it's all about profit."

Ray, a tutor in the Business and IT department, has worked at Manchester College for a year. He condemned the marketisation of education, saying, "Our students are just numbers on a screen. Anywhere that isn't privatised, the staff are being trained to be privatised."

"On the campuses like Nicholls where you have got T level classes [similar to apprenticeships, with courses based on collaboration with employers], it's night and day in terms of equipment. Students have asked some pretty difficult questions such as 'Why aren't we getting this equipment, what's so special about them?' [T level classes]"

"I only joined the college recently, but the view from the bottom is the only place that investment is happening is in places like T levels where there's direct marketability, the rest of the students are left in the dust."

"The quality of education and our fight for better wages and conditions are tied together. If teaching staff are not compensated for the work they do, then there's no way that won't negatively impact everything else."

"I have a colleague who told me last month they had to work until midnight just to get all the boxes ticked for some internal things. That's work that they are not paid for. These are people with families and their lives shouldn't be encroached on by endless piles of admin that in no way impacts on the actual teaching that's being done."

"Attendance is one of the top priorities, way above the actual quality of the teaching. A lot of the qualifications are related to attendance, because on paper it looks like they're doing a lot for students."

The war in Ukraine "has been used by fuel and oil companies as an excuse to jack up prices massively to a level way above any money they would be losing from the conflict. It's your classic disaster capitalism. What we are being charged extra completely outstrips the actual need of those companies that are still hosting colossal profits. It's an easy smokescreen. Easy profits. They don't care. The cruelty and the wrecking is all on purpose."

Janice has taught hairdressing at the Harpurhey campus of Manchester College for seven years. She explained, "we just want fairness; we're not asking for much."

"We worked really hard during the pandemic. Within a week we had to adapt to new ways of working online to support students. It's a case of recognizing that we went

above and beyond. During COVID we had more responsibilities, engaging students and their welfare. We did a fantastic job during difficult conditions, and it would be nice to be recognised for that."

Asked about the pay deals reached at Bury and Hopwood Hall Colleges, Janice agreed they "mean wage cuts. Petrol prices are going up, everything's increasing. Senior management are getting their bonuses. We should be on national strike. We should all come out together against the rise in the cost of living."

At a rally in Manchester on the June 10 strike day attended by up to a 100, the message from the UCU was empty rhetoric about solidarity and collective action. UCU FE Vice President, Maxine Looby, declared, "If we stand together, they can't touch us. We have to stand together, FE and HE."

The reality is that UCU is opposed to unifying its members even regionally, as shown with the Bury and Hopwood Hall College sellouts. The union has done nothing to organise a national fight of all 370 FE colleges over pay and conditions, neither is it prepared to unite workers in FE and Higher Education (HE) universities.

In the recent HE dispute over pensions, pay and conditions, the UCU called sporadic, ineffectual action to dissipate the anger of its members, then signed away pension rights and announced it was suspending national stoppages until 2023.

Educators fighting attacks on pay and conditions confront not just the employers but their partners in the education unions. The unions' collaboration was likewise essential to the government's unsafe reopening of schools, colleges and universities—major vectors for the spread of COVID.

Donna Coleman, 42, who worked at Burnley College, was one of the 570 educators known to have paid the ultimate price with their lives. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) investigation into her tragic death found her employer did not take "all reasonably practicable measures to control COVID-19."

A real fight for pay, conditions, COVID-safety and high-quality education for all requires a new leadership and organisation. Sign up for the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) and its newsletter today.



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