

UK further education staff at 29 colleges strike against below inflation pay offers

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Staff at 29 further education (FE) colleges in England have begun 10 days of strike action. Called by the University and College Union (UCU), the strikes are spread over the next month between September 26-28 and October 6-7, 10-11 and 18-20.

The union started balloting for strike action in June, with members returning a resounding “yes” vote of 89.9 percent on a turnout of 57.9 percent. The UCU described it as “the biggest mandate for industrial action across English further education colleges”. Nine more colleges delivered mandates to strike, but they are not going forward with action, as the UCU is currently engaged in negotiations for “suitable pay offers”.

Several FE colleges in northwest England have taken strike action on and off since May. The six colleges involved have been whittled down to three: Burnley, Liverpool, and Oldham. Staff there will strike on October 4, 5, and 6, overlapping with the larger strike on just one day.

The dispute centres on a pay offer from the Association of Colleges (AoC), the employer body, worth a meagre 2.5 percent for the year, a massive real terms wage cut with RPI inflation at 12.3 percent. The union is calling for a pay offer that “reflects the soaring costs college staff currently face”. But it has failed to demand anything concrete since its call for a pay raise earlier this year of at least 8.5 percent.

FE college lecturers have suffered stagnating pay for more than a decade, with the UCU estimating pay has fallen behind inflation by 35 percent since 2009.

The union is politically responsible for the poor pay and conditions suffered by educators. It has repeatedly delayed or sabotaged strike action while entering backroom negotiations with employers resulting in below-inflation deals. Last November, the UCU shut down action at 15 further education colleges after

reaching deals for between 2 percent and 3 percent (when RPI inflation was already 6.5 percent) and presenting them as “victories”. The union told its members they could look forward to a consolidated pay rise when negotiations resumed after Easter 2022. Almost a year since that betrayal, conditions are worse than ever. FE lecturers are among the lowest paid in the education sector, with most positions starting at £21,000 and the highest at just £39,000 despite decades of experience.

The surge in inflation accelerated by NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine, has left workers in a desperate position. A survey of 2,700 FE staff earlier this year found that 42 percent have incomes that do not cover their cost of living. Of these, almost two thirds (64 percent) said they heat their home less frequently, two in five (40 percent) said they restrict hot water and a quarter (25 percent) said they are skipping meals. As a result, 82 percent say their mental health is affected by financial insecurity. Fully 70 percent said they are planning to leave the sector unless they receive a pay raise.

Such an exodus will exacerbate staff shortages affecting FE colleges. About three-quarters of colleges in England are unable to recruit the staff needed to teach technical and digital subjects, according to the AoC, with many forced to cancel courses.

The employers claim they cannot afford to improve pay because of rising heating and building maintenance costs, with the AoC reporting “intense and chronic” budget pressure. Government funding to the FE sector has been slashed over decades, although this hasn’t stopped enormous salaries to college leaders. The City of Liverpool College’s principal received £179,000 in salary and other benefits. The principal of the Capital City College Group was the country’s highest paid

college leader, according to *FE Week*, receiving £235,000 in 2019-20.

There are 163 colleges represented by the AoC. That only 29 are taking industrial action—despite staff everywhere facing the same miserable conditions—is an indictment of the UCU, which has strung out its members for months while holding negotiations or mediation via the government’s Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS).

Unlike teachers’ salaries, which are set by the government, pay for FE lecturers is set by individual colleges, following a recommendation by the AoC. Since the AoC has recommended such a small raise, the union presents any small improvement as a “victory”, even if it falls well below inflation. For example, at Bury College, the UCU agreed a 6 percent pay rise (3 percent plus £1,000 lump sum). At Hopwood Hall College it negotiated a 7.5 percent deal. At Capital City College Group, which includes three colleges, the unions settled for 9 percent. FE staff are voting to approve these offers not because they are adequate, but because they have no faith in the union fighting for a better deal.

Together with the AoC, the UCU has organized cap-in-hand appeals to Truss’s class war government for more funding for the FE sector. The Department for Education (DfE) announced only £1.6 billion in extra funding for further education last December, but predictably this did not result in improvements to workers’ conditions or pay.

The union is promoting the possibility that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) will “reclassify” further education staff as public sector workers—alongside schoolteachers and university staff—rather than private sector workers. The UCU claims this would provide additional financial benefits, such as a VAT refund scheme, to the sector. But public sector workers confront the same poor conditions and pay. Schoolteachers are currently voting on whether to strike against a meagre pay offer from the DfE. As with the UCU, the National Education Union is doing everything to frustrate teachers’ struggle with its ballot being merely “indicative”.

The UCU has played a major role in suppressing the fight of tertiary education workers over the last decade. It betrayed a major strike movement lasting several years by 50,000 university staff. Now, amid growing

anger by its members in the sector, the UCU has finally called a strike ballot across all 150 universities, closing on October 21. But UCU leader Jo Grady has already declared her first response, no matter what the vote outcome, will be to resume negotiations before a single strike occurs.

The UCU has blocked a joint offensive by FE and Higher Education workers that would unite 120,000 in struggle across the sector, alongside rail, postal workers, dock workers and BT workers also fighting rapacious attacks by employers. The UCU is a pro-capitalist apparatus, demobilizing and suppressing the struggle of educators.

New organisations of struggle are needed. To defend pay and conditions FE staff must take their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy and form rank-and-file committees. All cuts to education, including the decimation of adult learning, must be reversed. Billions must be made available, not for NATO’s war against Russia and tax breaks to billionaires, but for a fully resourced education and health system. To take this fightback forward, join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



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