

Ahead of strike vote: UK higher education workers must build rank-and-file committees

Henry Lee
30 September 2022

Tens of thousands of higher education (HE) workers at 150 universities across Britain are balloting for strike action. The University and College Union (UCU) has called the first national ballot since 2019 after launching its “UCU Rising” campaign.

Workers in HE are facing another major attack on their pay, following the imposition of pensions cuts of up to 35 percent in April. While current RPI inflation is 12.3 percent, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) has made a pay offer of 3 percent for most workers and 9 percent for the lowest-paid, averaging only 3.18 percent.

While the union intends to give the impression of leading a charge against the employers, it was clear at the launch event for “UCU Rising” that the UCU is doing everything it can to avoid a fight. Launching the campaign on August 10, General Secretary Jo Grady announced four weeks of campaigning before the ballot, which would then last seven weeks and close October 21. No matter the result, it will be followed by a return to negotiations before any strikes might occur.

The UCU has around 85,000 members in higher education, who in a united offensive with thousands of striking further education staff—also UCU members—could strengthen the entire working class by joining the tens of thousands of rail, postal, dock and further education workers already in struggle. But the UCU’s timetable ensures that any HE strike would take place towards the end of the current term, or perhaps not even this term with Grady’s unspecified “finite amount of time that we get back around the table.”

The delays have allowed universities to divide HE workers, as members of the Unison union at 16 universities began rolling strikes from September 20 over the same massive cut to real wages. The *Liverpool Echo* reported on a particularly provocative decision by Liverpool John Moores University, which banned staff from hybrid working on the day of the strike, maximising the number crossing Unison members’ picket lines.

Grady responded to questions from UCU members who made clear they would struggle to pay their bills on the partial strike pay provided by the union. She brushed these off, making no commitment whatsoever to increasing the use of the strike fund. However, the fact that the bureaucracy felt it necessary to

publicly discuss questions that it would normally shout down or ignore was a clear sign that it was feeling the heat due to its widespread discrediting among HE workers, after carrying out years of betrayals, most notoriously in the 2018 national pensions strike.

The pseudo-left forces around the UCU Left—politically led by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP)—have years of experience justifying the unions’ suppression and betrayal of the class struggle. They hold a number of key positions on the UCU National Executive Committee, fielding 21 candidates in this year’s election to the body. Commenting in March after the vote, the UCU Left reported, “Our candidates did extremely well in general, winning about half the seats up for election. These results should mean that the left is in a majority on both the FEC [Further Education Committee] and HEC [Higher Education Committee]. While verbally acknowledging certain “mistakes” by the UCU leadership (of which they themselves are a crucial component), the group promotes every leftward feint to encourage workers to believe that perhaps *this time* with a little pressure the unions can be pushed to fight.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party have explained that workers must draw an important conclusion from the past few decades’ experience: that the unions respond to “pressure” by intensifying efforts to impose sell-out deals on their members. We call for workers to form rank-and-file committees, outside of the control of the union bureaucracy, to take charge of their struggles and lead the fight against all attempts to impose attacks on living standards.

Attacking the position of the WSWs, the UCU Left site posted a disingenuous article by UCU national negotiator and SWP member Sean Vernell on September 19, “Turn October 1st into a carnival of resistance: Coordinate and escalate to win.”

As is typical for the UCU Left, Vernell put forward a programme for what he referred to as “rank-and-file organisations” which would supposedly “see us through to victory.” But the “strike committees” he refers to are to be dominated by local bureaucrats, and restricted to “ensuring that members are kept informed of latest offers and details of negotiations” and used to “ply pressure on their leaders to call the necessary action that can win.”

In the strikes during the previous academic year, the UCU Left promoted “branch delegate meetings” as the means of ensuring “rank-and-file” control. Grady’s faction, safe in the knowledge that these organisations would do no more than “apply pressure” verbally, simply ignored any suggestions they made.

The “carnival of resistance” planned for October 1 refers to one-day strikes called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) and Communication Workers Union (CWU) unions, in which 115,000 postal workers will be on strike and more than 40,000 rail workers. Alongside these are 1,900 dockers in Felixstowe, the UK’s largest port, who join 500 striking Liverpool dock workers and engineers. Rallies will be led by the political pressure group Enough is Enough.

But there will be no “resistance” on the day from the UCU’s HE membership as the bureaucracy has ensured no strike mandate will be heard for weeks after October 1.

How does the UCU Left, which once claimed to oppose Grady’s “token” short strikes, suggest that the UCU join the “carnival of resistance”? Citing a motion the UCU proposed to the Trades Union Congress for a 30-minute “workday action” in 2019—that passed after being watered down from a “workday stoppage” —Vernell suggests a “great way to follow up” October 1 would be for the TUC to call a 30-minute “workday solidarity protest”!

Workers on picket lines have been calling for months to join up their struggles, making demands for a general strike. Vernell gives an historical account which is a damning indictment of the unions. He cites the only three examples of “unions nationally coordinating strike action this century,” all of which were “token” actions which did not go “beyond one or two-day strikes.” These were in 2005–6 against the Labour government’s pension cuts, a major pay strike by teachers and civil servants in 2008—again under Labour—and in 2011–12 against pension cuts imposed by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition.

As Vernell admits, the limited stoppages were “never going to be enough to prevent the attack on public sector pensions and pay.” He also points to the defeat of the miners’ strike in 1984–85 “because trade union and Labour leaders did not mobilise to join a coordinated fight, and the miners remained isolated.”

Given that the unions played the central role in inflicting such devastating defeats on the working class, why would anything be different this time? Vernell writes, “But this is not 1984. The terrain in which we fight is different. The miners’ strike took place in a period of significant defeats for the working class like the steel workers in 1982... Today this round of coordinated action takes place against a background of revival in workplace organisation, localised victories and the emergence of wildcat strikes.”

What Vernell omits from his analysis is the fact that the trade union bureaucracy responsible for the defeats he acknowledges

still sits on top of the working class and is just as determined to strangle it. There was no shortage of militant pressure on the trade unions during the miners’ strike, but they responded with an orchestrated betrayal. Left in charge today they will do the same—just as they have already allowed the one-third pension cuts suffered by HE workers, the huge uninterrupted decline in real incomes since 2008 and the more than 200,000 deaths from a pandemic which was deliberately allowed to spread, despite the scientific tools for its elimination being available.

Vernell’s rosy picture of the unions’ recent conduct follows by only one month an article he wrote in the *Socialist Worker* explaining that, “The experience of working people in 21st century Britain is one of falling living standards, after a pandemic during which so many sacrificed so much to keep society functioning. And some paid the ultimate price with their lives.” All this was presided over by the unions.

Despite talk about rank-and-file control, the *Socialist Worker* article justifies the existence of a bureaucracy which dominates its members: “Leadership can sometimes come from the full-time elected officials and general secretaries at the top of the unions.” They engage in this doubletalk even while noting that “despite Grady initially being voted in as president to make change in the union in 2018, she has taken the same route as her predecessor Sally Hunt.” Such was the anger among UCU members that the UCU Left felt obliged to put forward vote of censure against Grady for her role in derailing a fightback. This only narrowly fell during the union’s annual congress in June.

The strategy of the UCU Left is cynically calculated to trap workers within the unions: it downplays every betrayal, while making a few token criticisms, and then lauds every sanctioning of a strike ballot or limited industrial action as a genuine “leap to the left”. It’s entire *raison d’être* is to demonstrate that “a rank and file” movement can be built by a section of the bureaucracy, and that the union leadership will be forced to respond.

A genuine coordination of tertiary education workers’ struggles, and the organisation of a general strike, can only take place in a *rebellion against the union bureaucracy*, who will bitterly oppose any indefinite unified fight against the employers and the government. Workers in HE looking to take up this fight and seize control from the bureaucrats should contact the WSWs to discuss building a rank-and-file committee in their workplace today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact