Over 100,000 education workers strike UK universities, schools

Our reporters
25 November 2022

Tens of thousands of university workers at 150 universities began three days of strikes on Thursday against low pay, intolerable workloads, insecure contacts and pensions cuts.

A 48-hour strike by the University and College Union (UCU) members finished Friday, to be followed by a 24-hour strike and day of action on November 30. The strikes are the largest in history of higher education, with workers out at every UK institution.

Also striking are support staff, members of the Unison and Unite unions, demanding better pay and conditions.

Thursday's strike was held the same day that up to 50,000 teachers in Scotland walked out in their first national strike since the 1980s against pay restraint by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Scottish National Party devolved government. Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) members rejected—with inflation now running at 14.2 percent—an initial 5 percent pay offer and a revised offer of 6.85 percent for the lowest-paid teachers. The union is demanding a 10 percent pay increase, also below inflation.

WSWS reporters spoke to some of the university workers striking.

Manchester

University of Manchester lecturer Andrew Snow said that staffing number had fallen significantly. "Management made a calculation on the number of students they thought they would get after COVID. They thought the student numbers would drop so they offered voluntary redundancy to a load of professional support staff. But in one of my modules, they got double the number of students the following year. And we have significantly less support for them.

"That's also what they do with pensions, with pay and with staff numbers. They speculate and make a judgment on that speculation and its staff who suffers.

"As a teaching member of staff, I've got my workload associated with the modules that I work on, then I've got pastoral support for students. Then I do research. I'm on a fixed-term contract, so I also need to keep looking out for jobs.

"We're just asking for pay for the value that we bring to the country and the sector and security of contract that allows us to do our job effectively, and a pension that reflects how hard we work during working age.

"I did my undergrad at Manchester, did my PhD at Manchester and now I work at Manchester. I did the masters programme that I now teach on and it had 19 students on it in 2011/12. Last year, 10 years later there were 70 on it, so more than trebled, and the number of staff stayed the same. There's no slack in the system.

"Management have taken successive valuations that have proved to be wrong and use that as a basis for devaluing pensions. They took a valuation at the height of the pandemic when the international markets were in disarray. They said it was a £40 billion deficit and it wasn't. My pension this year was down from about £30,000 to £15,000. If you came into the pension scheme in the last few years you would stand to lose more—30, 40, or 50 percent of their pension."

Freddie, a politics student, said, "We're here to support our lecturers. Its only right. Al working people are struggling. It's not just rail workers, postal workers, nurses.

"I think the main issue is working hours. Lecturers are expected to work a lot longer than they are contracted for. Universities have been underfunded for so long. It's a crime. We're paying £9,000 a term for our education and the lecturers are on peanuts.

"If lectures are being paid better and treated better and have proper working hours, then we are going to receive a better standard education. So, it's out of class solidarity with our lecturers that we are here.

"Over the years there's been an increased marketisation of education. They've turned from places of education to places of profits. It's all about saving money and if that means cutting a lecturer's pension, that's what happens."

Bournemouth

Gabbi said, "I am on strike because I want my pension reinstated. It's not just about me, it's about every other lecturer in this country and we would like incremented pay rises that match inflation. Like everyone else we have got mortgages and rent to pay. Its 12 years since we had a proper pay rise.

"When I first started university students paid a thousand pound in fees and it went up to £3,000 and now its £9,000. The affect that has on the teaching staff is that it increases our stress because the students don't think they are getting value for money."

Associate Professor Rebecca said, "Women have also been paid 18 percent less at Art University Bournemouth [AUB). Bournemouth University is paid better than AUB. We are paid 10 percent less and Bournemouth is one of the most expensive places to live in England.

"The management have increased the numbers and it's just a circle of stress. The students are getting less teaching time and

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blame us if they don't get good facilities or don't have enough teachers.

"We also have to employ visiting tutors on zero hours contracts, which is quite stressful. They are fantastic but from one month to the next they don't know how much work they're going to get. They are levelling down, not levelling up."

Jonny Hoskins, a senior lecturer in acting at AUB, said, "It's important that we are properly considered as people working with proper conditions across the whole of higher education. It's important to support people in other sectors who are going on strike for equal rights and equal pay, and proper working conditions.

"It's possible we've been working towards a general strike. My postman is going on strike, the nurses are going on strike and the railmen are.

"I think we need to be honest with ourselves what higher education is about. It's followed a marketized model for a long time. It's in the interest of the shareholders or some other separate body of the hierarchical structure and not really in the interests of the people."

Kevin Chambers, Events Management lecturer at Arts University Bournemouth said, "One of the main issues is the casualisation of the workforce. My own experience is I spent almost two years working on very small hourly contracts in order to get a foothold in the sector and that's very typical. We've got a lot of colleagues without any job security. Our pay in real terms has been eroding for a long time and the pay offer we've received this year is a pay cut.

"Education is now a business and that's part of the problem. It needs to be a right that's available to everybody no matter what social background they are from and no matter which university they want to go to. People should be allowed to have an education and it should be free at the point of delivery.

"Today we are seeing our teaching colleagues in Scotland who are also out and in the post office and we've got people across all the different sectors including rail, nursing. I think it would be nice to see some coordinated action for us to try and make more of an impact.

Bradford

At the University of Bradford, a physiotherapy lecturer said, "I'm out on strike primarily because of workloads and the diminution of pensions. I feel these days, I could earn more back in the clinical sector. Workloads have become intolerable. I work 60 hours a week sometimes. It has affected me over time, including my mental health.

"In real terms, my pay has gone down. It's swallowed up by price rises, like the energy bills. I don't think my pay has every really kept up with inflation since I've been in work here. I have just about managed with the pay levels, but it's the workloads that really worry me. You don't have a decent work-life balance.

"I feel for the students. They have had a rough time, and with the COVID pandemic. I have had a lot of solidarity from students.

"I have talked about a general strike with some of my colleagues and I would support it."

London

Alexandria, a lecturer at SOAS University of London said, "I am on strike to get our pensions back and to fight against inequality in the sector. We have a decline in real wages, significant levels of casualisation and we have a gender rate and disability gap, and a ballooning workload.

"It's the first time we have managed to win in an aggregate ballot in the sector. That was a massive victory. We think the evaluation of our pensions that was done in the height of the first COVID wave was ridiculous. There is a 35 percent decrease in a pension of someone that joined as of today.

"In Italy where I'm from you can have secondary strikes but not here. For this particular strike wave, we managed to have a day set where all the unions have balloted successfully to be on strike so that we can actually be alongside each other legally, next week, on Wednesday, for the march. There are quite a few unions striking, as well as the rail, postal services and nurses. Hopefully by joint action we will achieve something.

"If everybody continues with this wave of strikes there has to be a point where the legitimacy of the second unelected Tory government has to be put in to question.

Tom Armstrong, a programme coordinator at SOAS said, "I'm on strike in defence of pay and pensions. I think we are all in agreement we should come out with other workers. I think it's important particularly going into the winter. There are many strikes going on, the rail strikes, the postal workers yesterday, and also Scottish teachers with us.

"So that meant in terms of even when it came to news reporting yesterday, there was half an hour on BBC *Newsnight* which wouldn't have happened if we had been on our own."

June, a lecturer at SOAS, said, "I've told my students why we are on strike and encourage them to support us. Many of them do. There is a general realization that we're at a point where we need to escalate and come together and I hope to see a general strike. We need a socialist government and to nationalize our public institutions, utilities, railways, and education.

"One thing that might seem a bit more feasible, in order to make more concrete demands in line with my own politics, is a call for a general election because I cannot fathom the idea that we are having two prime ministers in one year that nobody voted for."

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