

Trade union leaders speak at UCU London rally—rhetoric and reality

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The University and College Union (UCU) held a rally Monday outside London’s Kings Cross rail station to mark the third and final day of national strike action by 70,000 university staff at 150 universities.

The rally was attended by several thousand and included delegations of postal workers and others involved in strikes on the rail and in colleges.

University staff are fighting attacks on their pay, working conditions and pensions. The strike coincided with a national walkout by 115,000 postal workers who began a 48-hour stoppage Wednesday, the latest action in a months-long dispute led by the Communication Workers Union (CWU).

The UCU National Strike Rally was used by the union leaders involved in the three largest ongoing national strikes to portray themselves as organisers of battles on the verge of great victories. But there is a yawning chasm between the militant rhetoric of the speakers and the grim reality facing the hundreds of thousands of workers involved in disputes being led to defeat at their hands.

CWU leader Dave Ward declared, “Working class people always end up paying the price—no more.” He promised he was “fighting for every single worker in this country who is saying enough is enough.”

Just 48 hours earlier, the CWU had sold out a national strike of 40,000 workers employed by BT and its subsidiary Openreach. Amid all the talk of “fighting until we win,” not one of the speakers could bring themselves to cite this result as a victory.

The BT strike is the first of the large national disputes marking the “summer (and now winter) of discontent” to be squashed. Conditions are being prepared to dispatch with the others. All the union leaders on the platform spoke as representatives of an apparatus which has done everything to throttle votes by millions of

workers for strike action.

One of those was National Education Union (NEU) leader Kevin Courtney, representing a bureaucracy that has strung out balloting among hundreds of thousands of school workers, as their wages have lost 10 percent in value, to delay strike action into next year. In a rare moment of candour, he told the rally of a strike that day of 4,000 sixth form workers in the NEU, “We didn’t plan to be on strike the same day as you,” adding apologetically, “but we are really pleased to be on strike the same day as you.”

Unison General Secretary Christina McAnea gave verbal “solidarity” but could only promise “we will have hospitals out on strike before the end of this year.” It is thanks to Unison and the other health unions that action has been delayed so long. This meant that she was speaking hours after her union failed to pass the strike balloting threshold at all but eight trusts across the country—out of 262 employers—such is the lack of confidence in Unison.

As angry BT workers commented on social media in response to their sellout, under the leadership of the bureaucracy workers make large sacrifices to go out on strike only to see their pay surrendered anyway.

That danger is staring striking rail workers in the face, after the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) touted well below inflation pay deals at ScotRail and Transport for Wales as a model for the national dispute in England. Workers in Scotland received a 5 percent increase, plus £750, in exchange for agreeing to new technology and cuts. Workers in Wales got 4.5 percent, increasing to 6.6 percent with “productivity elements”.

This is what the “massive pay rise for every worker” Lynch referred to in his speech in London means in practice.

Lynch tried to strike the sharpest pose of opposition to Sir Keir Starmer's right-wing Labour Party, demanding, "Where is the front bench?" and insisting "We cannot wait for policy makers, professional politicians." But immediately afterwards he presented Labour as workers' natural political ally, declaring of this open party of capitalism, social inequality and war, "When people are in trouble, the Labour Party should be with us here and now."

This was buttressed by the appearance at the rally of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who delivered a series of homilies too inane to report, and Bell Ribeiro-Addy, described by the rally's chair, the CWU's head of communications Chris Webb, as one of the good MPs, "some of them are alright."

Starmer's unmistakable hostility to the working class and open opposition to strikes was later whitewashed by Lynch as "triangulating" between striking workers and voters.

Lynch, Ward and Grady are the main union leaders fronting the Enough the Enough campaign. Founded in August, its purpose is to shield the Labour Party and trade unions from political challenge and divert social anger into safe channels. Its launch marked the end of references from the bureaucracy to a general strike.

That did not change at the London rally, even as the number of workers in active disputes has grown—especially with the addition of hundreds of thousands of nurses in the Royal College of Nursing. Instead, the union leaders repeatedly invoked a vague "movement for change," and new "collectivism".

What this means was spelled out by UCU General Secretary Jo Grady. "During the last dispute," she said, which ended after huge pension cuts were imposed, "our employers ignored us." But now, "On pay and pensions, they are back in the room, and this is because of your action, and I am proud of you all. On pay they are currently negotiating with us right now after consulting with the employers about going forward to make an enhanced offer. Your action made this meeting happen."

On pensions she added, "Again, later this week we have employers in the room with us discussing what a deal would look like."

This is what winning looks like to Grady, Lynch, Ward and the rest. Not collectivism but *corporatism*, the joint operation of the union bureaucracy and the

employers to subordinate the working class to demands of the corporations. A policy they share with Starmer but are just as happy operating under the Tories.

During the pandemic, big business increasingly turned to unilateral action against workers, bypassing the usual agreements in place with the unions—making use of their massive suppression of the class struggle. They have been backed to the hilt by the government with a raft of enacted and proposed anti-strike legislation.

The aim of the trade union bureaucracy is not to reverse the catastrophic fall in their members' standard of living but to win back their seat at the table in enforcing cuts to wages, jobs and conditions, as an industrial police force for the major corporations and the government.

Last week Lynch hailed talks with the government's new Transport Secretary Mark Harper as "productive" and declared that the Tories has "got rid of the bellicose monsters that we used to have." Harper has publicly insisted, "Inflation-matching or inflation-busting pay rises are unaffordable."

To prove their reasonableness—Courtney repeatedly referred in his speech to the "moderate" union members who felt forced to strike—the union leadership keep what action they feel forced to call to a minimum. UCU members will not be out again until next year, which Grady hopes is enough time to secure a deal with the employers.

Workers are learning bitter lessons through suppressed and sold-out struggles in the role of the union bureaucracy as a partner to business and the government. These must be acted upon.

Attending the UCU rally, members of the Socialist Equality Party distributed copies of the statement, "Form rank-and-file committees to lead a UK general strike!" calling on workers to "seize control of their fate from the trade union apparatus." This is the essential fight facing the working class in the weeks and months ahead.



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