

Workers in three UK national strikes speak to the WSWS

“This is the start of people saying we are not going to take any more, where poverty levels are rising and we can’t feed ourselves and our families”

Our reporters
1 December 2022

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to striking postal, university and sixth form workers involved in national walkouts Wednesday and Thursday.

Royal Mail strike

Lucy Reid, a postal worker with over 20 years’ experience, was on the Croydon Mail Centre picket line at Beddington Farm Road in **Croydon**. She said, “I’m striking for my terms and conditions because [CEO] Simon Thompson is trying to take them away. Our postmen and women worked during COVID to make Royal Mail money and now Simon Thompson is saying we don’t deserve a pay rise and we don’t deserve our terms and conditions.

“People fought for so many years to get these and I’m not only fighting for myself but the future generation, my children and their children and beyond.”

To cheers from other pickets, Lucy said, “We have to stand up and be counted, solidarity everyone! We’re losing money today standing on the picket line and we’re not putting up with this. We are going to fight until we get what we want.”

Lucy expressed illusions in Communication Workers Union (CWU) leader Dave Ward, who she felt was leading a struggle to mobilise other trade unions and workers behind the postal workers, but agreed that a rank-and-file committee of workers to lead the struggle and a general strike “made big sense”.

On the CWU leadership’s appealing for support from Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer—an opponent of industrial action—Lucy said, “I don’t support Keir Starmer, and I wished we [the CWU] didn’t support the Labour Party either. That’s me speaking, I’m not speaking on behalf of the union. I don’t agree with Sir Keir Starmer’s policy and I wouldn’t vote

Labour because he is the leader. If there was a socialist party I would be voting for that, but we haven’t got one.”

Gary at Royal Mail’s Clifton Road picket line in **Cambridge** said, “They want to turn Royal Mail into a parcel only, gig economy company. We are also out for pay. Pay is not where it needs to be with inflation. The real thing is the terms and conditions. The postie on the street that serves the community will be totally gone and it will be the end of the service.

“They want to shift the start times and get rid of the morning delivery. Posties used to start at 5 or 6 o’clock in the morning, we probably won’t be starting till nearly 9 or 10am.”

Sophie said, “If we are starting later schools and businesses won’t be getting mail until the afternoon. It will be working in the hottest hours in the summer and in the pitch black in the winter by working later. Then you have postal workers who won’t be able to pick up the kids from school. There’s so much knock-on effect. People will leave the company.”

Regarding suggestions from Ward that the union would be prepared to accept a 9 percent pay deal, Gary said, “No way. That’s what’s been offered but it still comes nowhere near where we need to be.”

University staff strike

Tanvi, a PhD student and teaching assistant, was on the picket line outside **SOAS University of London**. She said, “I did my Masters at SOAS a couple of years ago and now I’m back doing a PhD, and I’m in the second year of that. I also teach at SOAS.

“I’m on strike because a lot of the PhD students are on teaching contracts and are some of the most precarious

workers. We are disproportionately affected by casualisation and pay cuts. I'm trying to exercise my rights as a student and as staff because I'm in a position as both. If I want to join academia later; I want to make sure I'm joining an industry that takes care of its workers.

"There are a quite a few people in my position, studying and having to work. I do multiple part-time jobs just to be able to pay my bills. I'm a teaching assistant at SOAS and I teach as a party of a charity, the Brilliant Club. I teach four hours a week there and teach at SOAS for about four hours. That doesn't leave much time to do the PhD. I really enjoy teaching but I just wish it wasn't done out of necessity to pay bills, but rather that it was because we enjoyed it and out of free will.

"My PhD is self-funded and I have my family to support me but to live in London, and to pay all the extra energy bills now in the winter is hard. There's other students who, even with stipends, they are struggling. The stipends don't reflect the cost of living."

On the fight over pensions, Tanvi said "I think it's important to stand on the picket line with all my colleagues who are affected by things like pensions. It's a broader struggle where we are standing solidarity for different reasons and recognising that these issues are affecting us all.

"We had a joint rally at Birkbeck and SOAS last week and we were all talking about how we are all fighting our own fights in our own industries but this is a broader workers' struggle and there is solidarity required across struggles.

"Ultimately we're all suffering the same material conditions even if they are in different industries. This is the start of people saying we are not going to take any more, where poverty levels are rising and we can't feed ourselves and our families on the wages that we have. I don't know what will come of it but I feel optimistic."

Paul, a member of the teaching staff at the Medical School, **University of Sheffield**, attended a University and College Union rally at City Hall.

"The main issue for me is our pensions. They have been after this for a long time. The independent review in 2018 was meant to have stopped this; our pensions had always been healthy. But they have gone ahead with the cuts. It is basically theft. It will doom the pension as less people will pay in as they do not know what they will get at the end.

Watch David North's remarks commemorating 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate today.

"Like most workers over the past 20 years we have received a pay cut, in our case by around 25 percent. Tuition fees have continued to increase since they were first introduced to £9,000 per year. There are billions of pounds in the sector which we have not seen any of in our wages. They are using students as a cash cow.

"The other issue is casualisation. So many staff are on temporary contracts. They hang on because employment in the universities is seen as a good job but they are recycled every six

to 12 months.

"Things are getting serious. Workers everywhere are facing the same issues. If the nurses see no other way than to strike for the first time that tells you something. Everyone is being overworked. A decent pension, fair pay and good working conditions should not be too much to ask."

A lecturer at the **University of Sheffield's** architecture department said, "I've been teaching for about 20 years but I started a PhD at Sheffield in 2013, teaching in 2014. It was only this year that I managed to get a permanent role. I've been on zero hours, temporary contracts. It got so bad that I had to leave the profession and was living off charity.

"I'm back and I'm not going to forget my experience, not going to be quiet and say, 'It's alright, I'm ok now'. There's still people in that situation."

Sixth form workers strike

Over 4,000 staff in 77 sixth form colleges struck for 24 hours Wednesday. The National Education Union members voted to strike by an 88.5 percent majority. Their strike was the first in six years in the sector.

In **Cambridge**, the WSWS spoke to strikers on the picket line at Hills Road sixth form college.

Martin said, "The dispute is over the pay offer of 5 percent. The rate of inflation is more than double that. We're asking for an above inflation pay increase because we've had wage stagnation for the last 12 years. Our case is not just that we ought to be keeping up with inflation but that we've experienced wage stagnation since 2010 and that is a real terms pay cut of about 20 percent. If we accept this offer, it's a real terms pay cut of about 25 percent.

"We're delivering for these students. Students in this country are getting good A Levels, they're getting good sixth form education. We're keeping our side of the deal with increased workloads, increased student numbers, reduced non-contact periods and increased internal marking. There are layers and layers of increased workload and increased student numbers, increased demands on staff, with wage stagnation. So we've said that enough is enough."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact