

UCU leader Jo Grady moves to block all out-strike action by UK university staff

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The General Secretary of the University and College Union (UCU) Jo Grady has intervened to block all-out strike action in Higher Education as university staff seek to escalate their fight over pay, conditions and pensions.

Last month saw 70,000 academic and support staff at 150 universities carry out the largest strike in the history of Higher Education, taking staggered action across three days on November 24, 25 and 30. This followed ballots held separately over pay and conditions and pensions that recorded majorities of 81 percent and 84 percent to strike.

Grady has now blocked a decision by the UCU Higher Education Committee (HEC) to move to indefinite strike action.

The HEC decision was taken in response to mounting pressure from academic workers after the UCU ruled out any further strike action until the New Year. The *Socialist Worker* ran comments on December 13 from Saira Weiner, a member of the HEC, stating that “pressure from below was impossible to ignore”, noting that several branches had passed motions calling for all out-strike action.

“We voted for all-out strikes because we have seen what has happened in disputes in the postal and railway service. More importantly we voted for it because that’s what members wanted. At branch delegates’ meetings, we have seen members vote for marking and assessment boycott and a serious escalation of the strikes.”

Grady’s response to an escalation of the action, scheduled for February 2023, was to unilaterally repudiate the decision. In a video addressed to members and branches, she denounced the proposal as divisive:

“An all-out strike in February could not only split our membership at a time when we need unity, but also play in the hands of the employer who wants to see us crash and burn not build towards a victory.”

She made clear she would do all within her power to prevent the action from proceeding, sanctioning only

further token stoppages in “blocks” in February, March and April.

Grady shows how far the union bureaucracy will stoop.

As justification, she referenced the need to build up the union’s fighting fund. This is from someone whose top position in the union guarantees a basic salary of £140,213 and pension contributions, plus expenses—placing her among the highest earners in the UK.

It is Grady who is joining hands with the employers, along with the heads of Unison and Unite who have agreed to call off further strike action as they pursue talks with the Universities and College Employers Association (UCEA) into February.

What is being prepared is not a victory, but a sell-out. The unions have accepted the framework of the UCEA, which has stated that negotiations on pay for 2022-3 are closed after the de facto pay cut of just 3 percent was enforced earlier in the year.

Grady has portrayed in a positive light the “offer” to bring pay negotiations forward for 2023-4, based on an 18-month agreement, claiming it represents “a recognition that workers are facing a cost-of-living crisis, and recognising the strength of anger shown by our ballot results and our strike action.”

She made clear in the same press release on December 9 that her aim was to foster management and union collusion. “In the spirit of attempting to reach agreement, the joint unions agreed to intensive negotiations between now and the end of January, with further negotiations continuing into February and beyond as required on the other heads of the 22-23 claim.”

Against class struggle, Grady advances a “leverage” campaign pitched at the political representatives of the ruling elite. A 12-page document, “UCU Rising-Winning the Dispute”, advocates “influencing” politicians and other external organisations—including the Universities

All Parties Parliamentary Group, the Education Select Committee and local MP's—and making a “request an intervention from the Shadow Secretary of State.”

This excludes any struggle to reverse the dire situation faced by lecturers and university staff given Labour's long record of the marketisation of higher education and the ongoing attacks by the Tory government.

The UCU's own research demonstrates how the sector has been converted into a cash cow for narrow economic and financial interests based on a root and branch attack on the conditions of university staff. It reports that the UK university sector generated a record income of £41.1 billion in the last year, with 150 vice-chancellors collectively earning £45 million.

This has involved a downward spiral in the pay and working conditions of those providing education for students required to pay upwards of £9,000 a year in tuition fees, plus accommodation. Since 2009 university staff have lost 25 percent of their wages in real terms and are working the equivalent of two additional days unpaid each week. A third of academic staff are on temporary contracts. In April, pensions were cut by 35 percent.

The demand for all-out action is a genuine reflection of the sentiment in the working class that “enough is enough”, unlike the official Enough is Enough campaign which Grady helps front. The group—led also by Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union leader Mick Lynch and Dave Ward of the Communication Workers Union (CWU)—serves as a mechanism for the trade union bureaucracy and a dwindling number of Corbynites to keep a lid on every struggle.

Higher Education workers' call for all-out strike action is a rebellion against the failed strategy pursued by Grady, Lynch and Ward alike to limit industrial action to a programme of sporadic one and two-day strikes.

Ward and Lynch have stifled strike action since the Summer and suspended planned stoppages on the grounds that union executives were back around the table with the employers. At no stage have they outlined any independent pay demands or mounted an unconditional defence of jobs, terms and conditions. This has opened the way for below inflation deals and other attacks.

Both leaders have stooped to new depths in recent weeks, with Ward leading protesting postal workers to Buckingham Palace to appeal to King Charles and Lynch penning a letter to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak calling for direct talks to end the rail dispute.

The WSWS commented on the Enough is Enough rally held in conjunction with the UCU on the last day of

university strikes—addressed by Grady, Ward and Lynch:

“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.”

Even as the *Socialist Worker* refers to leaders of the UCU having “moved to betray its members and trample on union democracy”, there is no demand made for Grady to be removed from her post. No matter the complaints made by the pseudo-left and their supporters, they will do nothing that challenges the suffocation of the working class by a bureaucracy in which they are integrated at the highest levels.

The preconditions for a genuine industrial fight and workers' democracy can only established by breaking the grip of the bureaucracy and transferring power to the rank-and-file. This includes taking control of the resources of the union built up by its membership to prepare a fight, not line the pockets of well-heeled officials while they negotiate surrender terms.

This is the issue posed in every dispute. Workers taking up the fight for rank-and-file committees will find broad support for organising co-ordinated action between nurses, rail, postal and millions of other balloting workers in a general strike against the Sunak government and its Labour Party allies.



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