UK's University and College Union bureaucracy puts below inflation pay deal to a ballot

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31 January 2023

More than 70,000 members of the University and College Union (UCU) employed in 150 UK universities will join “escalating” strike action for 18 days across February and March, and begin a marking boycott from April, in a dispute over pay, working conditions and pension cuts. The first strike will be held February 1.

After the overwhelming mandate returned in October, and a vote by the union’s elected Higher Education Committee (HEC) in November to call an indefinite walkout, the union bureaucracy has succeeded in whittling down the action to only 18 of the 43 working days in two months.

This was forced through by UCU General Secretary Jo Grady by blatantly anti-democratic means. In November, Grady invoked the anti-union laws to keep the HEC from even mentioning its vote for an indefinite strike until she was prepared to campaign against it. Not a single HEC member, either from the pro-Grady UCU Commons faction, or the opposition in the UCU Left, broke this silence for weeks. A second HEC meeting on January 12 voted in favour of the calendar of 18 days.

The UCU Commons attacked the idea of an indefinite strike because it would cost a quarter of a million pounds per day from the union’s £30 million reserves. Despite more than £22 million in annual dues income, the pro-Grady faction told higher education (HE) workers, “We need to be realistic and ‘live within our means’ when it comes to available strike funds.” A former HEC member, writing in *Times Higher Education*, said that the union sets aside only “£2 million to £3 million” for strike pay, which is limited to £50 per day for only 11 of the 18 days of strikes.

On January 26, the UCU announced a legally required re-ballot in the dispute would begin the week of February 20, after only nine strike days since the first ballot last year. In a UCU live event, Grady repeatedly claimed that victory was just around the corner.

Not a word was said in the meeting about opposing new anti-strike laws, despite UCU members joining the Trades Union Congress’s “right to strike day of action” on February 1. On the contrary, Grady pledged to follow the “incredibly bureaucratic legal requirements” to the letter.

She has made repeated overtures to the universities to come back with something on pay that she can use as an excuse to call the strikes off. After the first one-day strike on February 1alongside 300,000 school workers in the National Education Union (NEU) —the next planned walkout is not until a 48-hour stoppage eight days later. At the re-ballot launch Grady emphasised, “We are giving our employers a significant amount of time to continue talking with us, to talk to their team about how much further they can and must go. The ball could not be more firmly in their court if they want to take action that’s not going to result in all of those strike days being taken.”

Despite expressing outrage at Grady’s intervention to block an indefinite strike, the Socialist Workers Party-led UCU Left faction did so while downplaying the gravity of the struggle facing the union’s members. UCU Left member Matt Perry argued, “Indefinite action would resolve matters before the long haul approach,” while the SWP approvingly quoted the co-chair of the UCU branch at Queen Mary University of London’s assertion that “I don’t think this has to be a forever strike. The reason I support indefinite action is

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because I think it is the fastest way to victory."

The denunciation of "forever strikes" is the same rhetoric employers and the right-wing press use to attack striking workers. Employers' body Universities UK said last March, "Reasonable onlookers will conclude [UCU] has an ideological fixation with strike action and is determined to pursue it, no matter the cost." This drew anger and mockery from HE workers, but UCU bureaucrats and their defenders in the pseudo-left echo this anti-class-struggle language.

Before the dates were announced, the University and Colleges Employers' Association (UCEA) offered a major real-terms pay cut of a mere 3 percent pay rise for most HE workers for 2022-23, and between 4 and 7 percent for 2023-24. It made an insulting "improvement" last week, adding an extra 1 percent but only for workers earning over £51,805.

The education unions will accept a deal that nowhere near meets the demands of workers trying to keep up with surging prices. The joint statement by the UCU and four other unions on the most recent UCEA offer watered-down the unions' original demand for RPI inflation plus 2 percent to a vague call for "an inflation-based offer". They have stressed, "We remain committed to a negotiated settlement."

On Monday, Grady sent an e-mail circular to members insisting on an electronic ballot on the latest UCEA offer (between 5 and 7 percent). The UCU bureaucracy is putting the offer to a vote, despite an overwhelming number of members at the ballot relaunch posting comments rejecting it.

Grady claimed that the right-wing media will attack them for "failing to engage members" if the UCU leadership rejected it out of hand as an insult to their members. The ballot on the offer will close February 3, with Grady's email cynically saying the UCU was calling for rejection.

The bureaucracy is seeking to wear workers' resistance down in order to secure a below-inflation deal. Grady wrote, "As well as pay, the issues in this dispute include workload, casualisation, and pay equality." The union and UCEA, behind closed doors, have agreed to shelve these issues, as the email confirmed: "Both sides have agreed to focus on pay first and then negotiate over the other pay-related elements."

Workers in the universities are in a position to wage a powerful struggle to reverse pay erosion and precarious employment and defeat the government's attacks on education which have seen courses in the arts closed and whole departments shut down. However, this requires a new strategy, based on mobilising workers outside the control of the union apparatus, and a turn to other workers.

On Wednesday members of the UCU will be striking at the same time as school workers in the NEU, on a "day of action" marketed by the unions and pseudo-left as the beginning of a major fightback against new draconian anti-strike laws.

Workers must learn from the experience of Rail, Maritime and Transport and the Communication Workers Union members, who began the current wave of strikes last summer, but have had a united struggle blocked as the unions agreed below-inflation deals at Merseyrail, ScotRail, Transport for Wales, and at BT. If left in the hands of the unions, Wednesday's strike will be used to blow off steam, not to build a genuinely united offensive by the working class.

Workers in higher education and schools must form rank-and-file organisations they control, which can unite rather than divide educators around demands which will win mass support from other workers and students: an end to marketisation and massive funding increases for staff pay and teaching resources, secure contracts for all staff, and increased hiring to reduce workloads and class sizes.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, part of the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, was formed in 2020 to organise the powerful oppositional sentiment among education workers. University workers should contact us today to discuss how to begin forming rank-and-file committees in their own workplaces.

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