

UK university workers speak from the picket lines during national strike

Our reporters
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Over 70,000 university staff at 150 different institutions took strike action this Thursday-Friday in ongoing disputes over pensions, pay, and employment conditions. Members of the University and College Union (UCU), Educational Institute of Scotland, GMB, Unison and Unite unions took part.

As the action got underway, UCU general secretary Jo Grady made clear the union bureaucracy is desperate to end the strike and secure a deal in behind-closed-doors discussions with the employers. A circular to union members celebrated a meeting at the Acas arbitration service—the graveyard of workers’ disputes—next Monday and Tuesday. It read:

“We have gone from a position where the employer sat out the whole dispute to one where we have Universities UK (UUK) indicating that they could move on USS pensions, a fresh pay offer on the table and now discussions at Acas. None of the employers’ positions at this moment represent something that we could deem acceptable but we have them back in the room and agreeing with us on crucial matters”.

Previous experience shows that any deal agreed between the union bureaucracy and the employers will be a rotten sellout of members’ interests. The strike must be brought under the control of the rank-and-file through their own, independently organised committees.

World Socialist Web Site reporters discussed the issues at stake with pickets in Sheffield and Leeds.

Renala, a lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University, told our reporters, “The big thing here is the casualization at Hallam. We have 800 on casual contracts and that’s a third of the academic workforce.

“Our contracts don’t have sick leave, annual leave—workers’ rights that have been embedded for years. We have lost 20 percent in real wages. If inflation carries on like this, we will lose a lot more.

“The thing that enrages me is the argument the university makes that people want ‘flexibility’. That word should be banned from the English dictionary! People don’t want flexibility; they want job security.

“We need to go back to free public education.”

Rose, a Fine Arts lecturer in Art and Design, said, “Many of our staff are on zero hours contracts. That makes our jobs much more difficult. It intensifies our workload. It also means our students don’t get the best teaching they are entitled to. They also don’t get the support they would get if they had more permanent staff

members.

“The second reason I’m on strike is the lack of resources to give to our students who have immense additional needs, mental health needs at the moment, post-COVID needs.

“Obviously, the pay cut adds insult to injury.

“We are 90 percent research-active staff, so that means that we are often pulled away from teaching. We’ve had two courses that closed recently or are being phased out—metalwork and jewellery. To cut metalwork and jewellery seems ridiculous for the cultural identity of the ‘City of Steel.’

“We see across all our communities, in every area of our lives, a hollowing out of very basic services. Look at the NHS, the fire brigade, the civil service, schools.

“Huge profits are announced by corporations and it’s outrageous.

“Eighteen days of strikes is a strong mandate and we’ve got huge public support. There is a huge feeling of a movement again. More joint actions are definitely the way forward, and a general strike.”

Max is a PHD student in Art Practice exploring Jewish identity. He said, “A lot of times trying to organise meetings with supervisors is really difficult. They’ve not got time to read work that you send them. They try hard and are constantly working beyond 5pm and trying to accommodate students, which is amazing. Ultimately, I don’t want to put them in that position, of being overworked and doing unpaid work.

“Marketisation breeds students saying things like, ‘We paid £9,000 or this. We deserve a good education. What are you doing on strike?’ They feel hard done by. I understand that a transactional relationship shouldn’t be what education is about. It doesn’t create a collaborative atmosphere where you want to learn together.

“Pay has gone down by 25 percent since 2009. This is not good for anyone and certainly not good for the thousands of working class students who come to this university. They deserve good quality and well-respected staff, and they are not going to get it unless universities pay up.

“Support has been strong so far. Perhaps it should go to indefinite strike if they don’t get anywhere after 18 days.”

Roman, who works for Leeds University’s sustainability team, said, “This university operated with a surplus of £60 million last year. However, they do not want to share it with staff. When I see that colleagues have to rely on food banks, have to choose between

eating and heating their house, this is not acceptable. Which is why we're out on strike and will be out until they cave."

Simon, an IT systems vulnerability manager, added, "The money that we're being paid is not enough. The Weetabix I have every morning now costs £4 rather than £3. Milk is 75p rather than 50p. So before even starting the day, everything's increased by 50 percent.

"This is after years and years of below-inflation pay rises. People work very hard, with very little else other than sleeping and eating, working hours and hours to keep the university running through a huge period of global disruption. We were with the university to support them during COVID, but they're not here to support us during the cost-of-living crisis.

"There is blatant wealth inequality here. That's why we've got Shell, we've got BP making billions, and we've got nurses striking.

Roman added, "Exactly! Our own vice chancellor earns £336,000 a year, which is pretty penny. On the 26th of January, since the beginning of the year, she will have earned more than me in an entire year.

"It's a matter of fair redistribution. There is money. Both the government and this university can find money when they need it. This campus has seen so many vanity projects over the years. There is a building just up the road where the refurbishment cost £96 million. How many members of staff can you pay with that money?

"It's the same thing with the government. They can spend millions on a botched track-and-trace system or handing out PPE contracts to their mates.

"If it were down to me, we'd all be out [on strike] tomorrow."

Rob is a project manager in digital education services, putting university and other courses online for students to access remotely.

He told us, "There are so many people out today because of the long-term, downgrading of salaries. But it's also job insecurity. Casualization is a big thing. I've come from the private sector, And you can see that people have lost rights, lost the ability to protest, lost pensions. If you don't stand against this it will happen at the universities and it will happen everywhere else in the public sector.

Jane is a cleaner and **Zoe** a housekeeper at the university. Jane explained, "When staff are off, you're having to do more and more. They don't seem to be replacing as many cleaners anymore.

"Our pay has not really gone up. It's been increased, but not by inflation. My family are having to cut back on a lot. I do batch cooking, so it lasts for two or three days. There's no money for treats anymore, like nights out."

Zoe said, "I've got a child; I've had to cut back on things that I can treat him to. The cost of the mortgage has gone up. Although our wages aren't going up, everything else has gone up. So we're having to cut back to be able to keep a roof over our head, to heat the house, feed our family.

Jane pointed out, "It affects your mental health as well. You can't take your kids for days out, you've got to really watch the pennies. Then the kids don't always understand that you haven't got that money. Treats that you might give on a weekend, they're

cut out as well. So it's a depressing time.

"When you hear those statistics, about how much the people at the top are making, it doesn't feel good knowing you're right at the bottom, not getting anywhere and working harder. It's sickening."

"It's absolutely ludicrous that the university vice-chancellor is on over £300,000 a year," said Zoe. That's equivalent to 15 of our cleaners who are struggling just to keep their heads above water. There are people here on £20,000 a year who have to use food banks and take on second jobs.

"We are the roots of the trees. Everyone's important to run the university. But without the support staff, who get forgotten about, we wouldn't have lecture rooms for students to go into without us because they won't be cleaned. They won't have lightbulbs replaced by our maintenance staff. It needs everyone to be recognised, and for everyone to have decent pay for the work that we do."

At Liverpool John Moore's University, sociology lecturer **Mary Jane** said, "For me it's [the strike] is about casualization, even though I recognise lots of other reasons people are on strike. I was more or less on casual contracts for about seven years. I finally had an offer of a more permanent contract and I just felt more secure.

"So now I can participate in strikes and have hopefully made the point that casualized working is not a great way to run a university. As a casual worker, I was always stressed chasing my tail and looking for other jobs. And in that context, I have to write lectures for students who are paying lots and lots of money.

"But recognise as well that there's massive problems in the pay gap, the cost of living crisis is hitting everybody especially our casualized workers, some of which I work with. They sit in homes, correcting papers and they can't afford to turn on the heating. They've got their hats or scarves on and they're sitting in the room marking papers for students. Students who pay so much money to have papers marked by people whose fingers are too cold to type.

"I just think that's outrageous in one of the richest countries in the world. And I know the money's there, I teach sociology, I know the numbers. It's just in the wrong hands. I think that's a message that should become mainstream now because there's not much time left to sort this out. It might be 30 years that it might take to come back from this. The standard of living will be better in Warsaw in Poland before this is over."



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