UCU suspends strike at University of Sheffield International College to bring back derisory pay offer

Our reporters
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University and College Union (UCU) representatives have suspended five days of strike action by educators which was due to begin on February 13 at the University of Sheffield International College (USIC). The strike was suspended on February 8 to ballot the UCU membership on a revised pay offer which amounts to another slap in the face.

Around 80 educators at USIC became the first to take strike action at a private higher education provider in the UK last November with three days of stoppages.

They took a further four days of strike action on January 30, 31 and February 2, 3 and have conducted a work to rule since November 21. The five days of stoppages represented an escalation of industrial action. This was suspended by the UCU based upon the latest tabled offer which in no way meets the mandated demand for a 12 percent pay increase.

In the announcement of the decision on the USIC UCU Twitter page it stated, “We have suspended our strike next week. We have been offered a ten percent pay increase over two years for staff earning under £44K and an 8 percent increase for staff earning over £44K. The major part of this is backdated. We will now consult members on this offer.”

USIC is connected to the University of Sheffield and uses its coat of arms, providing preparation courses for overseas students and is owned by Study Group. It is contracted with 50 universities to provide online and face-to-face learning and is one of the largest corporate providers of international education for universities in the UK, Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.

On the picket lines full-time lecturers and those on short-term contracts stood together with homemade placards refuting the claim that a cost of living increase was unaffordable. These showed graphs of the salaries of senior Study Group managers with the number on more than £100,000 a year trebling in the past years and directors positions advertised for up to £130,000. The starting rate for a full-time lecturer at USIC is approximately £32,000, well below the national average of £38,131. Office and support staff are recruited at full-time rates barely above the minimum wage.

Three days prior to suspending the action to bring back the sub-standard deal a thread on the USIC UCU Twitter page read, “Last week we also notified our employer that we would be taking a full week of strike action, beginning on Monday 13th February (next week). We demand a fair pay increase.”

The latest miserable pay offer from Study Group is: three percent payable from September 1, 2022; two percent for staff earning less than £44,000 per annum to be payable from January 1, 2023; one percent for all staff to be payable from January 1, 2023; and four percent for all staff for the 2023/24 academic year with the 4 percent paid on September 1, 2023. A £300 one off payment to office staff who earn little more than the minimum wage has not been reinstated since being withdrawn by management at the latest ACAS arbitration service talks.

At every stage in the dispute the UCU leadership has worked to minimise and suspend any strike action after claiming its campaign has secured concessions when they are the only side involved in a climbdown.

The latest suspension of strike action is only the most recent in a series of moves that have seen the UCU leadership and branch representatives obfuscate and cancel industrial action.

In March 2022, the union called off eight days of planned strikes at USIC after reaching an agreement on a long-standing dispute over pay and holiday entitlements for 2021. The deal negotiated by the UCU involved a pay increase, backdated to September 2021, of 3 percent. This meant a real term three percent pay cut but was dressed up as a “victory”. It was even suggested to members that the employer committing themselves to commencing pay negotiations for 2022 as soon as possible with a starting figure of 3 percent was positive.

USIC educators rejected a 5 percent offer from Study

Group in October and returned an 84 percent majority for strike action in the UCU industrial ballot.

The first ever strike at a higher education provider in Britain only occurred after initial attempts by the UCU to derail it failed. The union suspended the first two days of strike action scheduled for November 17/18 on the pretext of a 1 percent improvement covering just four months in the management offer.

The eagerness to maintain the cosy relations between Study Group and the union bureaucracy was expressed by UCU Regional Officer Julie Kelley who described the suspension as a "gesture of goodwill". Only once staff delivered another decisive ballot rejecting the company's proposal did the strike go ahead.

The accommodation to Study Group has continued ever since with the UCU push back against the demand for 12 percent. After the first strike in November last year the union unilaterally retreated to "reasonable and achievable" 9 percent—substantially below RPI inflation. UCU representatives said subsequently they would inform Study Group that they would recommend an offer of 8 percent to the membership.

Finally, before going back to ACAS in January this year, the UCU offered Study Group a sellout deal of 8 percent this year and 2 percent next—in effect a 6 percent cut this year and, on current projections, another 5 percent the next. This was rejected out of hand by Study Group who actually reverted to an earlier inferior offer at conciliation services.

At the instigation of union reps the 12 percent demand has been whittled down to such an extent they put forward 6 percent this year, half the demand mandated by the membership, and an additional four percent next year. The "new" offer from Study Group is being dressed up by the union as a 10 percent increase across two years when in fact it represents in real terms a 10 percent cut.

With RPI index inflation rate falling slightly from 14.1 percent to 13.4 percent this represents a hefty 7 percent wage cut this year and on calculations based on current projections, another 3 percent cut next year.

The UCU desperately wants to wrap the dispute up in double quick time. Its plea was for Study Group to offer a pay deal over this year and next as a deal breaker, in order to disguise from union members the protracted nature of a substantial pay cut. The UCU's agenda was to keep the strike against a UK private education college hermetically sealed from the wider struggles of educators and the working class because the increased exploitation and pay cuts faced by workers at USIC are legion throughout the education sector and indeed across the whole economy.

Zero efforts have been made by the UCU to unify the USIC dispute with a simultaneous UCU pay dispute at Sheffield Colleges who provide further education at five sites across the city. The now suspended five-day stoppage starting from February 13 at USIC would have coincided with three days of strike action by UCU members at the University Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University staff on February 14, 15 and 16 as part of nationwide action at 150 universities by 70,000 educators.

The strike suspension will also place USIC educators in the invidious position of crossing picket lines at the institution mounted by the English Learning Training Centre (ELTC) UCU members, who work at the college but are employed by the University of Sheffield. That the UCU bureaucracy has created this situation to ballot on the substandard deal is refutation of its claims of unifying the action of educators at colleges and universities.

USIC educators should reject this miserable sell-out by the UCU and the savage attacks upon their incomes being waged by Study Group. USIC staff must draw the lessons of the dispute, especially the UCU's campaign to enforce a pay cut upon the membership.

In opposition to the grinding down of resistance by the UCU and isolation of the dispute, the formation of a rank-and-file committee would take control of the fight and make an appeal to link up with and mobilise with other educators, teachers and students together in a struggle against the employers, public or private, right across the education sector.

The fight for a cost of living pay increase is inseparable from reversing decades of marketisation undermining the provision of public education as a fundamental democratic right and turning higher education into a cash cow for the likes of the Study Group.

The globally organised and highly profitable corporation cannot be taken on without overcoming the fight being restricted to one locality but by USIC educators turning out to co-workers across at Study Group across the UK and internationally.