UK university workers hold three day national strike

“I’m in favour of a more generalised mass movement of workers across the continent against austerity.”

Our reporters
16 February 2023

University lecturers and other higher education workers at all 150 UK universities completed three days of strike action Thursday. The 70,000 University and College Union (UCU) members are striking for better pay and conditions and against the gutting of their pensions.

This week’s industrial action completes nine of a scheduled 18 days of intermittent stoppages being held in February and March.

The UCU is seeking to end the strike with a sellout deal and is involved in negotiations with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) at the conciliation service Acas. It is joined in the talks by other unions in dispute with university employersthe EIS, the GMB, UNISON and Unite. Ahead of the talks, UCU leader Jo Grady said, “Our union is determined to reach a negotiated settlement which allows staff to get back to work and students to continue their studies uninterrupted.”

Prior to the latest strikes, the UCU bureaucracy insisted a below-inflation pay offer from UCEA was put to an electronic ballot, even while saying it was “worth only 5% for most UCU members.” In the survey, over 30,000 members voted to throw out the offer by a margin of 80 percent.

The UCU calculated that the employers would return with a slightly increased pay deal the bureaucracy could again put before the membership, claiming this as its extraction a victory. The union complained in a statement on February 8, “Despite staff emphatically rejecting the 5% pay award, employers have not yet responded with an improved offer.”

The employers have no interest in making any concessions, despite the first national strike by university workers taking place almost four months ago. A UCU statement noted that the employers “have admitted it would cost just 3% of their reserves [more than £44 billion] to settle UCU’s pay claim.”

Sheffield

Simon is a Professor in the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield. He explained, “There’s been an ongoing, long-term issue around the massive reductions in the worth of the pensions in the Universities Superannuation Scheme. The other issues are low pay, casualisation, pay inequalities, particularly gender-based pay gap, and job security.

“Lots of our colleagues are on various short-term, insecure contracts with hourly rates. This is something that’s grown over the course of my career from an exception to being the norm. We want a return to a proper profession where you can make a decent living.

“Stress levels make things really hard. This round of strike action is 18 days which is a huge challenge for many members of staff to participate in financially, but it shows the level of determinations that there are so many people out here in this important action.

“The Conservative government doesn’t want to negotiate as they hate universities and higher education. Generally, they’re setting out their stall to defeat strikes across a whole host of different sectors.”

Simon said of rail, National Health Service and other workers involved in ongoing industrial action, “I do very much see this as part of the same struggle. What’s happened in the railways and in schools is part of the same story as what’s happening in universities.

“I hope for these to be united in a broader political movement… We had a one-day action in common with teachers and other educators. I think there are prospects for us to be more united… Being part of that bigger struggle is good for us because people care about nurses and teachers in ways that they haven’t thought of academics. There’s greater strength in bringing these disputes together.”

Asked his view on billions of pounds being made available to fund NATO’s war in Ukraine, Simon responded, “Economically, there is a link between military spending and budgets for social services such as education. We’re dealing

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with a government that, even in terms of the history of the Tory party, has moved a long way to the right. It's unsurprising that they're boosting militarism. I wish our priorities were different, as it means money not going into hospitals, schools, and universities."

Patrick, a Mathematics and Physics lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University, said, "The attacks on the education system has an effect on my colleagues here that's most visible in terms of workloads and work intensification. This has always been one of the driving priorities for me and a lot of my colleagues since we were out on strike before the pandemic in 2018 and 2019 and the issue has not gone away.

"There is a common struggle amongst us and workers at Sheffield Further Education (FE) Collegeand at the University of Sheffield International College (USIC)over work intensification. Before I worked here, I worked at USIC and at an FE college in the North East so I know how hard they've got it. I left the job because I had no time to myself. I'd done my contracted hours by Thursday morning.

"Strike action by all these sections of educators is long overdue. Their workload situation isn't too different to teachers in primary and secondary schools… At USIC, the main issue is the paltry annual increase in wages compared to inflation.

"It would be really positive to join up our common industrial disputes across the UK… More broadly, I'm in favour of a more generalised mass movement of workers across the continent against austerity."

Donna, a UCU rep at Sheffield Hallam University said, "There's been a rise of fixed-term, insecure, short-term contacts. We have junior staff who may have degrees, masters', PhDs and they're sitting by the phone waiting for it to ring to get a few hours work. If there's nothing here in Sheffield, they may go to Nottingham Trent or Sheffield College, as they may be on the books at several places. It's exhausting having to do this.

"My predecessors came over from Ireland and they'd stand on the street corner in the hope that a builder would give them a day's labour. It's the equivalent today.

"I was a part of the last cohort of students that didn't have to pay tuition fees and loans and who got a full grant. Now I'm teaching people from working-class backgrounds that can't afford to travel for higher education, who are still shelling out nearly £10,000 per year for their course.

"Infrastructure is being systematically underfunded. I work in a building that has had two ceiling collapses in the past six months. The very fabric of our teaching environment is falling apart.

"The humanities are being attacked, with some arts and education courses being cancelled. Other courses are being combined. There is a government and university management drive to build courses around business requirements and employability. They decide that arts and humanities aren't vocational, so the educational diet offered to students here is limited, focussed on sport, management, tourism and hospitality, and health. These are valid subjects, but you can whistle if you want philosophy or history.

"They're looking for other markets such as recruiting international students who pay higher fees… They see international students as 'units of income,' which I've heard them referred to as in meetings. They're monetising education for international and domestic students."

Huddersfield

Lecturer **Gary** on the picket line at Huddersfield University has worked in software engineering in the Department of Computing and Engineering for 20 years. He said, "In the arts and humanities, where they had significant redundancies last summer that school has a large number of people on short term contracts. They've closed most of the linguistics, have closed some of the other areas of arts and humanities. There's not much left now in drama or textiles and other areas.

"The vice chancellor at this university is paid more than many Oxbridge colleges. It's hard to get solid financial data because the accounts are not always published on time, but it can't be short of £400,000 plus his pension and chauffeur-driven Jag."

But for teaching staff, "Pay has been cut by some 20 percent over the last 10 years. It is the equivalent to working for free for about one day a week."

At Manchester Metropolitan University, lecturer **Matt** said, "We're just not given enough time to do everything which needs to be done. You know, we're supposed to do world-quality research, offer world-class service, do a lot of admin, keep things moving and we're just not giving enough time to do it. We've had a 25 percent pay cut since 2008. For a lot of younger colleagues, especially further down the scales, that is hitting them very hard."

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