

University and College Union sells out UK higher education strike

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20 February 2023

On Friday, the University and College Union (UCU) called off seven days of strikes set to be held over the next two weeks. The sell-out came 24 hours after 70,000 university lecturers and other higher education workers at all 150 UK universities held three days of strikes. This completed nine days of a scheduled 18 days of walkouts this term.

The national strike was called off unilaterally by UCU leader Jo Grady, without receiving any concrete offer addressing members grievances over pay, conditions and pensions. This came just hours before the next three strike days were due to take place beginning February 20.

UCU negotiators had spent days in talks with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) along with four other education unions—Unison, GMB, Unite and EIS—at the ACAS conciliation service. Following the talks, the unions issued a joint statement with UCEA confirming that the employers had conceded nothing.

On the issue of pay, UCEA's original well below inflation 5-8 percent offer will be imposed. The joint statement declared that "parties agreed that further progress was made on the uplift at the lower end of the pay spine and that a pay impasse, rather than an agreement, has been reached." The employers cheered, "*This completes the negotiations and discussions for pay, agreed as the priority phase by both parties in a bid to provide some early pay uplift six months early.*" [emphasis added]

The UCU originally demanded (RPI) inflation plus 3 percent, or 13.7 percent.

In relation to casualisation among the HE workforce the agreement states, "UCEA has agreed to consult its members, with a positive recommendation to take action on zero hours contracts... We accept that there will be specifically defined reasons in any organisation for offering indefinite or fixed term employment arrangements without fixed or minimum hours where it is appropriate."

The UCU's shutting down the strike is only the latest example of the trade union bureaucracy's suppression of the class struggle and betrayal of their members throughout months of strikes that began last summer, including the sell-out of 40,000 BT workers in December.

Dave Ward of the Communication Workers Union, Mick Lynch of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and

Grady herself are the leading lights in the "Enough is Enough" campaign, set up to provide a left cover for a union bureaucracy overseeing defeats of the working class. But these sellouts are not down to the personal spinelessness and perfidy of individuals. They are the logical outcome of the control of disputes by a *bureaucratic apparatus* which operates as an industrial police force on behalf of the employers and the state.

Workers must understand that if their struggle is left in the hands of the trade union bureaucracy it will be sold out and defeated. Any national executive or even a general secretary can emulate the actions of Ward and Grady and they will do so as soon as they feel able.

The RMT is in constant talks to end its dispute. Last week it announced only a further four days of national strike action on the rail network for March 16, 18, 30 and April 1 and only by rail workers at the 14 train operating companies in the Rail Delivery Group. Its members at the Network Rail infrastructure firm will only participate on March 16 with further industrial action limited to an overtime ban.

The government is seeking to impose a 4 percent deal for the National Health Service (NHS) in 2022-23. Last Thursday, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) announced that the next strike by its 300,000 NHS members would run for 48 consecutive hours (the longest yet) in more than 100 services beginning at 6am on March 1. But they did so after dropping an initial 19 percent pay demand and offering to accept 10 percent and then saying they would consider *any pay offer*. In response the Tory government refuses to back down. RCN leader Pat Cullen pleaded "we are now urging the prime minister to step in with 12 days to try and resolve this, around a round table today."

In Scotland, the RCN has recommended acceptance of an average rise of just 6.5 percent and a miserable on-off payment (including just £387 for those in the lowest paid band). The official measure of inflation is at 10.5 percent and the more accurate RPI measure at 13.4 percent.

After calling out 100,000 of its civil servant members in 123 government departments on February 1, the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) limited action to sporadic strikes by a few thousand members. Receiving no concessions on pay, pension and job security, the PCS has only now announced that it would again hold an all-out strike for one

day, to coincide with Chancellor Jeremy Hunt's first full budget on March 15.

Earlier this month, without even calling any industrial action, the Fire Brigades Union said it "unanimously recommends that members accept [a] pay offer." They are balloting 30,000 firefighters on a paltry agreement offering just 7 percent (backdated to July 1, 2022) and then an even lower 5 percent from July 1, 2023.

Hundreds of thousands of teachers struck on February 1, but only after the failure of last minute talks between the National Education Union and other education unions with Education Secretary Gillian Keegan failed to reach agreement.

Last week almost 96 percent of 112,000 postal worker in the Communication Workers Union (CWU) voted in favour of renewed strikes against Royal Mail on a 77 percent turnout. Royal Mail is intent of slashing pay and working conditions and imposing 10,000 redundancies by August. Postal workers took 18 days of strike action from last July up to Christmas Eve, in the first national strike action since 2009, prior to privatisation. Earlier this month the CWU abandoned a 24-hour national strike scheduled for February 16/17 in the face of threatened legal action by Royal Mail. The timing of the re-ballot means that no strikes can be held until March.

More workers are being driven into struggle. On Monday, junior doctors voted by a majority of more than 98 percent to strike. The British Medical Association said a three day strike was planned in March, but named no dates.

Workers cannot take a step forward if the trade union bureaucracy remains in charge. A rank-and-file rebellion must be organised for workers to take control of these struggles. We urge workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss the vital lessons of the strike movement and to organise the necessary fightback.

WSWS reporters spoke to university workers and students who participated in a protest outside the UCU's London headquarters on Monday evening in opposition to the union's decision to call off the strike.

Paul, a UCU branch rep said, "I don't want to be here today, but I feel I have to because we've been let down by our general secretary, let down by our union. The message comes out at five-thirty on a Friday—and we don't have a chance to reply—telling us the strikes have to be paused for the next three weeks. There's no discussion with the members whether we're in favour of this or not.

"As for the pay dispute, they're basically going to impose now the pay deal we've already voted against. They've said the talks have been exhausted and they won't be having any further on pay. Well, we've already voted against that. So how can they possibly do this without even telling us?

"I've got to go back to my members and try to explain to them why we've been on strike for so many weeks and don't seem to have achieved anything. There's no commitment on

zero-hours contracts; they could replace them with one-hour contracts. The same on pensions; nothing is set in stone.

"I don't feel like we've won anything from the dispute. Now we've got two more weeks of strike action before our mandate runs out and the employers will just sit that out. It destroys the momentum."

Referring to the UCU's sellout of the pensions dispute in 2018, Paul said, "I feel I've been let down twice. Jo Grady was all about being more democratic and campaigned against what [predecessor] Sally [Hunt] had done, but it sounds like she's going down the same road now."

Claire, a student, came to offer support. "I'm a student at the University of Westminster and I'm here to support the striking teachers because of the horrible situation they are facing—a 25 percent pay cut in real terms since 2019; 70-80 hour work weeks. It's untenable. And as a student it's also in my own interests to support these strikes, their working conditions are my learning conditions.

"It's an absolutely undemocratic to stop strike action during the middle of negotiations and to present these paltry promises from the employers as some sort of victory. It's also really dangerous for the momentum of the strike and the dispute as a whole, and the movement as a whole. The working class needs to move together. There needs to be coordinated strike action."

Asked why she thought there had been so little co-ordinated action, she answered, "That's down to the union leadership. There hasn't been any real effort to coordinate. Rank-and-file members need to try and do that on their own."

Mike, the assistant secretary of a retired members branch, told us that he was protesting to show intergenerational solidarity, to protect the pensions of retired and new workers alike.

"Pensions are deferred wages. It's our money and we want it. If the employers beat the people currently in work, then we're next. They've already cut the pensions of people who are retired by moving off the Retail Price Index [inflation measure], which has cost about 1 percent a year. So, in the 12 years I've been retired that means my pension has lost 20 percent of its value."

He explained, "The general secretary, on Friday evening, announces that the strikes have been called off, and I don't think she has the right to do that. It was an overwhelming decision to strike.

"Now this is the prelude to a major retreat, if not a complete sellout."



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