

Higher education employers begin imposing pay cut as University and College Union steps up moves to sell out UK national strike

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30 March 2023

This month, universities in Britain began to impose a pay deal of between 5 and 8 percent, which was de facto accepted by the University and College Union (UCU) and other campus trade unions when they suspended strikes in February. The imposition represents a 15 percent real terms pay cut for the 2022-24 period.

Strikes were suspended with a joint statement between the UCU and university bosses agreeing pay negotiations were at an “impasse.”

The UCU bureaucracy launched a flurry of fraudulent “e-consultation” online ballots after announcing a deal with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) two weeks ago, which it claimed would be an “interim resolution” of the remaining disputes over pensions, workload, casualisation and equality. In fact, the deal merely set up further talks, resolving nothing.

UCEA made clear that it would only begin talks “on the understanding that no further industrial action, including ASOS [action short of a strike, such as a marking boycott], is called during these talks.” The five higher education (HE) unions, including the UCU, issued a joint statement claiming, “we will not agree to any cessation of industrial action up front for the next 12 months,” but entering into talks is a de facto acceptance of the strike ban.

UCU announced the pensions deal on social media March 16 with the unambiguous claim that “we have won our pensions back.” An attached video saw UCU General Secretary Jo Grady claiming, “In their new proposal, our employers have agreed to restore the 35 percent cut they made to your pension ... and last but not least, they’ve committed to working together to ensure that this scheme remains sustainable.”

Universities UK (UUK), which represents the employers in the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension scheme, did indeed commit to a “sustainable” pension scheme. However, this was not a promise but a threat to not reverse the cut if the upcoming valuation, completed in September, gives them the slightest excuse. The carefully worded commitment in the joint UUK-UCU letter on pensions was “to prioritise the improvements of benefits to pre-April 2022 levels, *where this*

can be done in a demonstrably sustainable manner.” [emphasis added]

In a podcast about the deal she described as “truly historic,” Grady said, “until we have the [pension] costings in September, we can get off picket lines,” and cancel an upcoming marking boycott. She added, “the only thing at this point which could change this valuation would be a severe economic shock.”

Sections of the ruling class have long called for the conversion of defined benefit pensions such as USS—in their view an excessive and now unaffordable concession to workers—to inferior defined contribution schemes, which do not provide a guaranteed income.

Financial Times chief economics commentator Martin Wolf wrote approvingly last week of a call by former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair and former Conservative Party leader William Hague for defined benefit pensions to be “radically consolidated and turned into open collective defined contribution schemes.”

Higher education workers’ pensions are far from safe in the hands of UUK, the USS governors, or supposedly neutral central bankers.

Many members denounced the education unions for isolating workers at the post-1992 universities who are not part of the USS pension scheme, but who had been striking together with other university workers over pay and other issues.

The UCU claimed that its “victory” in the talks that would, in its words, “end zero-hours contracts [ZHC] for every person who doesn’t want to be on them.” But many HE workers pointed out that universities which claim to have “abolished” zero-hours contracts for PR reasons still use contracts with a tiny number of guaranteed hours.

One wrote “An end to ZHC means nothing. Are you aware of [the University of] Cardiff using contracts that specify you will be guaranteed 2 hours teaching a year?”

The widespread use of fixed-term contracts was left unchanged by the agreement, apart from setting further talks. The fact nothing had been agreed on this issue, affecting one-third of the workforce (tens of thousands of workers) and which many of those on indefinite contracts suffered for years in the

past, also drew condemnation.

One UCU member concluded “Lots of uncertainties being a young casualised worker in academia. But we can confidently say both our employers & unions will always throw us under the bus first.”

On every other issue, the agreement between UCU and the universities merely sets “terms of reference” for further talks. These involve a panel of 10 representatives from the unions and 10 from the universities together with ACAS conciliators, tasked with working out proposals which “can be recommended for acceptance” by the UCEA to universities and by the UCU to its members. That is, deciding the minimum that workers can be browbeaten into accepting.

The terms for the review of the pay spine, which is supposed to increase pay based on seniority, contains a major get-out clause for the employers: “In the unlikely event that no agreement is reached the existing position regarding the pay spine will remain.” The terms for discussing casualisation also allow insecure contracts to be offered provided the reasons are “discussed between [universities] and their local trade unions.” Other sections contained similar language about involving the unions in overseeing equality and workload issues.

While gaining nothing for HE workers, the “terms of reference”, reviews and associated seats at the employers’ table for the union are what the UCU bureaucracy wanted all along.

Many university workers, on the other hand, responded angrily to the deal, especially the lie that UUK had already agreed to reverse the pension cuts. This follows protests last month by UCU members—including outside the union’s London headquarters—against the calling off of seven days of strikes by Grady, without the employers offering a single concession.

In response to the March 16 statement, an estimated 10 percent of branch meetings passed motions of no confidence in Grady and condemned the union’s e-ballots, which undemocratically linked a proposal for the deal to be put to full ballot with a proposal to pause strikes. This was under conditions in which tens of thousands of UCU members were already being balloted to renew their strike mandate, as required under Britain’s anti-strike laws. That ballot closes on March 31.

One UCU member tweeted in response to Grady’s video, “Why do you keep lying? The promises on pensions in the podcast transcript are extremely vague and depend on costings that will be done in September. So we have won absolutely nothing yet.”

Another said, “This seems exaggerated to the point of being actively misleading.”

Around 100 people protested outside the UCU’s headquarters after the deal was announced, holding signs reading “no capitulation”, the same slogan workers used in 2018 to oppose then-general secretary Sally Hunt’s moves to sell out the pension dispute. Such was the hostility to Hunt, who was able

to eventually push through a sellout, that she was forced to resign soon afterwards.

The recent protest was called by the UCU Left, a faction in the union led by the Socialist Workers Party, which celebrated Grady’s election in 2019 as a “leap to the left”. A component part of the UCU bureaucracy, UCU Left has found itself compelled to criticise—while maintaining that all opposition be corralled within the structures of the UCU—Grady’s nakedly anti-democratic attempts to shut down the strike.

The *Socialist Worker* reported several branch meetings attended by large numbers of UCU members which passed resolutions condemning the union’s attempt to call off the strikes for the announced deal. This included almost 300 workers at the University of Leeds who voted 63 percent against pausing the strikes and only 30 percent in favour, and 215 workers at the University of Edinburgh who voted by 92 percent against suspending strikes.

HE workers entered into this fight determined to defend their living standards and defeat a concerted offensive by the employers and government. But their struggle now faces going down to a huge defeat. To prevent another UCU sellout, they must take leadership of the dispute out of the hands of the union bureaucracy through the formation of their own rank-and-file committees.

Emergency branch meetings must be called demanding the removal of Grady and the bureaucracy and an end to e-ballots on an offer which the membership clearly opposes!

The Educators Rank-and-File Committee, part of the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, was formed in 2020 to organise education workers opposed to the unions’ sellouts of their health, jobs, wages and conditions. Contact the Committee today to discuss the way forward.



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