

# UK higher education institutions respond to University and College Union marking boycott with escalated attacks on workers

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UK higher education (HE) institutions are stepping up their offensive against tens of thousands of staff participating in a marking and assessment boycott (Mab).

On April 19, the University and College Union (UCU) announced the boycott would start the next day at 145 universities. The boycott covers all duties relating to marking and assessment, including exam invigilation.

The UCU sanctioned the boycott after members voted to reject employers' proposals on pay and conditions.

Senior management teams at a number of universities responded by threatening to dock the pay of workers involved. An April 20 tweet by Dr. Kait Clark, a cognitive neuroscientist and senior lecturer, confirmed that fully 22 institutions said they would dock 100 percent of staff pay. Another 24 universities threatened to slash between 20 and 80 percent of pay.

According to *Tribune* magazine, "At the University of Essex, staff have been told that if they declare they are boycotting within the next week—something they are not legally required to do—they'll have 50 percent of their wages deducted. If they don't declare, 80 percent of their wages will be deducted."

The union sanctioned the boycott as a means of demobilizing national industrial action involving 70 university employees which began last November in connection with the long-running disputes over pay, working conditions and pension cuts. The union bureaucracy is intent on ending the dispute with a sellout deal.

The UCU called for a series of one-day strikes to be held in late February and March, before suddenly cancelling almost half of them after announcing "real progress" in talks with employers. That "progress" was a rotten pay deal concocted with management behind the backs of its members. It included wage rises of between 5

and 8 percent, a 15 percent real terms pay cut.

The last national strikes were held over six days from March 15-22. This despite workers voting overwhelmingly to renew their six-month strike mandate, as required by law, in early April.

The prostration of the union before the employers was underscored by union General Secretary Jo Grady's declaration that "we do not want this boycott to go on any longer than it needs to, but the status quo cannot continue." In the meantime, workers were advised only to "Please contact your vice chancellor and tell them to get back around the table with a fair offer."

Grady posted a video April 19 on her Twitter account adopting a more militant posture in an attempt to restore some credibility, claiming that the boycott will be escalated to a strike at the universities that cut members' pay.

In the April 5 ballot to renew the strike mandate, the vote over the pay and working conditions element of the dispute saw a Yes vote for strike action of 85.6 percent on a 56.4 percent turnout. In the pensions ballot, the Yes vote was even larger (89 percent on a 58.4 percent turnout), showing the determination of thousands of staff to defend their pensions.

On April 17, the UCU announced that its members had voted by 85 percent to "note" the pensions agreement reached by the union with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). This result was achieved by the UCU using a misleading formulation in an "electronic consultation", asking its members to either "note" or "reject" the "progress" made by the union in negotiations with the employers on pensions. The union interpreted and then presented the result as though workers had voted to accept a deal it claimed was a "historic victory" that will "win back a stolen pension"

and “pave the way for the restoration of benefits.”

As the WSWs noted, those statements cannot be accepted at face value. What the employers committed to is reversing cuts *if* “this can be done in a demonstrably sustainable manner,” following an upcoming valuation in September. There is little doubt that they will seize on the tiniest pretext to formalise the 35 percent cut in pension benefits, or something similar.

Many workers were critical of the union on social media, asking why the question on the pensions talks was posed in that way and refusing to accept the union’s claims of a stupendous victory. Among their comments were, “Still claiming a victory on USS [Universities Superannuation Scheme] I see. It’s not won until that money is back in members pension pots & contributions reset—progress has been made but calling it a victory continues the overly optimistic & misleading language...” and “We have not won anything yet.”

In their efforts to hoodwink workers, the union bureaucracy relies on the help of the pseudo-left. In article published as the boycott began, the Socialist Workers Party presented the marking boycott as a rank-and-file demand *against* Jo Grady and the bureaucracy. It reported a higher education special sector conference that took place on April 19, where delegates voted to go ahead with the boycott and against a motion delaying it.

Of course, in this union bureaucracy-curated arena, workers never had the option of voting for anything *more* than a marking boycott. The conference also voted for a resolution saying that any UCU branch hit by pay deductions should be able to strike. Many universities have since said they will impose deductions, but not a single strike has been called in opposition.

The *Socialist Worker* promotes UCU Solidarity, a grouping within the union whose role it is to use left-sounding rhetoric to capture rank-and-file opposition and redirect it into the “safe” channels of the union’s structures. UCU Solidarity works in concert with the UCU Left, a faction of the bureaucracy politically led by the SWP.

UCU Solidarity and UCU Left previously made an occasional show of criticising Grady and her faction, warning that the dispute could end in sellout and defeat in her hands. But any such criticisms have been largely dropped, with the SWP declaring on April 20, without mentioning Grady, “The battle over who controls this dispute continues—but many workers have shown they are determined to ensure it’s them, not union officials.” They advise, “Workers must fight to keep the Mab going and

couple it with strikes. And every branch that is facing pay deductions should push to strike as soon as possible.”

But organising a genuine struggle will require the formation of rank-and-file committees which take the power to circumscribe and cancel strikes out of the hands of the UCU bureaucracy. For all their rhetoric about calling strikes alongside the Mab, in its latest update on the dispute, UCU Left states only that workers involved in the marking boycott should try to meet in branches perhaps two or three times a week, as the means to overcome isolation from each other!

The pseudo-left bear major responsibility for the elevation of Grady. During the last union leadership election in 2019, the SWP and UCU Left supported her candidacy once it was a fait accompli—hailing her as “a shift towards the left” and “a boost for workers who want their union to put up more of a fight to defend workers’ rights and education.” In their cover-up operation for Grady, the UCU Left, with many members within the union leadership, at both the local and national levels, is playing a critical role in the UCU’s sell-out.

The struggle of university workers in the UK is part of a global resurgence of the class struggle nationally and globally. Millions of workers have taken part in strikes in Britain and internationally during the past year, including many educators. These are the allies that HE workers must turn to in order to expand and take forward their fight for better pay and benefits, as well as pensions.

HE workers must take the dispute out of the hands of Grady’s faction, but also fight independently of all factions of the UCU. 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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