Strikes at Manchester and Bradford FE Colleges as UCU negotiates below inflation deals

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On Friday, UK lecturers at The Manchester College and UCEN ended twelve days of strikes over pay begun on May 15, with further stoppages planned for June 5 and 7. Strikes also took place at Bradford College on May 24, with more actions planned for June 5 and 7, June 12-14, and June 19-22.

Lecturers in further education colleges (FE) in England have seen their pay fall by 35 percent since 2009, as well as suffering deteriorating conditions. Yet there is no attempt by the University and College Union (UCU) to mount a unified campaign of strikes throughout FE, let alone unite with its members in the universities or educators in schools currently in dispute with employers and the government.

The Manchester College is the largest FE institution in the UK, spread across 10 campuses and providing education for 16-19-year-olds and adults. At UCEN it offers degree courses. Lecturers walked out after rejecting a 2.7 percent pay rise with a one-off payment of 1.55 percent. The vote to reject was an overwhelming 94 percent on a 59 percent turnout.

A UCU committee spokesperson told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, “This is the fifth time in the calendar year we’ve been forced to take strike action.” The current strike follows “pay settlement for 21/22 which came to about 3 percent which was a mixture of consolidated and unconsolidated elements.” The current RPI inflation rate is 11.4 percent.

“The average pay for a member of staff in a further education college is significantly below that of a university,” the spokesperson said. “It is significantly below that of a primary and secondary school and there is no reflection of the level of expertise and professionalism in the pay offers made.”

He continued, “Every year the workload gets bigger and the pay stays the same. A fairly common trick is they [management] will allow administrative functions to degrade, and they will impose those jobs on the people left. They say there will be no cuts to frontline staff, however, ‘We won’t be replacing five administrative posts’. All those administrative functions still need to be done so the workload increases year by year by stealth.

“Casualisation is also an issue and increasingly we see full-time permanent contracts replaced.”

At Bradford College, lecturers rejected a 3.2 percent offer by a 90 percent vote on a 58 percent turnout. According to the *Telegraph and Argos*, a college spokesperson said, “The planned strike action follows an unresolved national 10 percent pay award demand made by the UCU”. The lecturers previously walked out May 4, 16 and 19.

An administrative worker of six years, Robin, told WSWS reporters, “I’m striking because the workload is terrible, my wages are falling and the staff are overworked.

“The increase represents 8 percent to me because my pay [for a 30-hour week] is so low, less than £13,000 per year. I would not apply for this job today given the circumstances now. I don’t have a mortgage; I pay rent and have nothing spare to cut back on. My working tax credit pays my rent and if rents go up my home will be under threat.”

Last summer, the UCU published “On the Breadline: The cost of living for England’s college workers”. A survey of 2,700 FE lecturers found eight in 10 skipping meals or restricting the use of hot water, while seven in 10 were contemplating leaving FE teaching. Poor pay,

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job insecurity and workload had a detrimental effect on the mental health of four in five respondents. The starting salary of qualified lecturers is less than £26,000, while some FE bosses earn over £200,000.

In June 2022, college lecturers nationally voted 89.9 percent in a 57.9 percent turnout to strike, after rejecting pay awards recommended by the Association of Colleges (AoC). No unified action followed, only a series of disaggregated stoppages, ending when the UCU negotiated below inflation deals college by college.

After 29 FE colleges held 10 days of stoppages in September and October, the UCU settled for as little as 6 percent.

The lecturers' strike over four weeks in February this year in Sheffield was paused after the union, which was asking for 4.5 percent, entered talks at the government's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS).

In the same month, the UCU called off national strike action at the universities over pay, casualisation and pensions.

National collective bargaining at England's FE colleges ended in 1993, when the Conservative government conducted a major overhaul of further education to the detriment of pay, conditions and funding. The National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE), which merged with the Association of University Teachers in 2006 to form the UCU, did not lift a finger in opposition.

Like schools, FE colleges were removed from local authority control to be run privately with public funds. The Silver Book, established in 1975, determining FE lecturers' national pay and conditions was scrapped overnight. The reforms ended national pay scales, increased working hours, reduced funding per student below schools' rates, decreased the staff to student ratio, and opened the door to casualisation and privatisation.

The UCU is conducting a lukewarm campaign to reintroduce national collective bargaining to cover its collaboration in negotiating pay cuts. As part of its Respect FE campaign 2023-24, the union conducted an e-ballot asking FE members, "Are you prepared to take strike action to secure an above inflation pay rise, binding national bargaining structures, and a national workload agreement?" The result was a resounding 87 percent yes. The UCU is putting forward a 15.4 percent pay rise claim for 2023/24.

The UCU's ongoing betrayals of its membership are facilitated by the Socialist Workers Party, whose members lead the UCU Left faction. The UCU Left ran a candidate against Grady during the election for the union's general secretary, but promoted illusions in her as a 'left' after she won. It is bolstering the bureaucracy's posturing over leading a united fight this year.

Socialist Worker reported the "union's further education committee supports the aim to launch a national strike… The push to win a national strike is a shift from recent years when strike ballots were called and counted separately…The UCU Left organization says it's necessary because, 'Unless everybody's wages and conditions rise together it is difficult to make gains at a local level for more than a short period'."

At the UCU conference Saturday, members voted to censure Grady, who avoided a vote of no confidence by a fraction. At a fringe meeting, UCU Left members, referencing the rebellion of nurses and postal workers against their union tops, meekly proposed greater democracy in the union and building strike committees.

The fragmentation of the working class can only be ended by wresting control of the class struggle from the union bureaucracy and building new rank-and-file committees run democratically by workers themselves. These organizations will become schools for socialism. The struggle over pay and conditions is bound up with the struggle to overthrow capitalism, which demands the impoverishment of workers to pay for the government's war economy and the wealth of the oligarchy.

Contact the Educators Rank-and-File Committee today. The Committee's Twitter page is here.

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