

More UK universities deduct academic workers' pay as marking boycott continues

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Staff at 145 higher education (HE) institutions in the UK are continuing with a marking boycott (MAB) after voting to reject the latest proposal on pay and conditions from their employers, which would have included wage “rises” of between 5 and 8 percent—well below inflation.

The University and College Union (UCU) has organised the boycott having sat on an 85.6 percent majority strike mandate since early April. The last national strikes were held over six days from March 15-22.

Through the MAB, the UCU is attempting to demobilise and divide its members. Not only are they not on strike, but out of the 120,000-strong membership of the UCU (which includes academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians, technicians, professional staff, and postgraduates) only part of it is involved in marking and can participate in the boycott. The rest are frozen out of fighting and are being told to passively “support” the action.

Despite the limited nature of the action, it has the potential to have a significant financial impact on the universities, opening them up to students seeking compensation for the disruption of their degrees. Several employers have retaliated fiercely by deducting staff wages.

Sheffield Hallam University is deducting 100 percent of the pay of staff taking part in the MAB, despite staff continuing to teach lecture and support students as normal. In response, union members have taken seven days of strikes so far.

The University of Winchester has also announced that they will make wage deductions of 100 percent for staff taking part in the boycott. The local UCU branch took six days of strike action through May and June.

The University of Cardiff is withholding 50 percent of the pay of staff participating in the boycott. It is planning on using administrative staff and external markers to mark exams, while at the same time removing second marker moderation (an important quality control mechanism) to speed up the process. This prompted the local UCU spokesperson to accuse the university of giving out “bargain basement degrees”. In response, staff will be picketing graduation ceremonies and have announced 15 days of strike action in July and August.

Nearly 2,000 UCU members at the University of Leeds are taking part in indefinite strike action that began on June 15th, scheduled to continue until management stops its 100 percent deductions.

Workers are reporting on Twitter that SOAS University London has also started deducting up to 100 percent of wages. The local union began industrial action for 18 days, starting on May 22.

UCU branches at the Universities of Dundee, Strathclyde, Edinburgh, and Durham have reported 100 percent deductions and are organising strike actions, though in most cases it will take place at the start of next semester. Other universities that are striking this month include Keele, Liverpool Hope, Bristol, Leicester.

The UCU at the Universities of Manchester (50-100 percent pay deduction), York (100 percent), Aberystwyth (50 percent), Swansea (100 percent) and Essex (80 percent) have not acted despite deductions being confirmed.

At Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland, MAB action was called off by the UCU in exchange for a promised £3,000 lump sum payment this month. This has not been forthcoming, with the employers saying the Department for Economy will not approve the

payment without agreement on the national pay deal.

What was a national dispute of 50,000 workers at 150 universities has been splintered by the UCU bureaucracy into several smaller, isolated strikes. Most will take place in June-July when their impact will be seriously limited given it is then near the end of university term. The UCU is also not providing any strike pay at all, with virtually all local branches relying instead on “hardship” funds, paid into by staff and supporters, to provide a pittance to their members.

While many employers turn the screws, others are striking a more conciliatory pose to push for a final sellout agreement, urging the UCEA (Universities and Colleges Employers Association) to restart negotiations on pay and conditions to stop the MAB, knowing that the UCU will do its best to impose a rotten deal on its membership.

It is increasingly clear to the UCU’s membership that its leaders are leading them up a blind alley. There has been widespread opposition on social media to the newly negotiated pensions deal, presented by the union as a “victory” which would “restore” pensions. Protests were held outside the union’s London headquarters against the calling off of national strikes.

At the UCU’s Congress this year, a motion to censure general secretary Jo Grady passed by 155 delegate votes to 117. But after a subsequent motion of no confidence was rejected, Grady and her allies have been able to continue their betrayal of the dispute.

A key role in defending the bureaucracy is played by the UCU Left, a faction controlled by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which directs opposition into safe channels.

It passed a motion at the UCU Congress supporting the establishment of “strike committees” at UCU branches in support of the ongoing dispute to “ensure that control of industrial action is the hands of the rank-and-file UCU members”. However, in reality, these strikes committees would only have an advisory role to the National Executive Committee of the union and would have to bow to its decisions, making them an ineffectual left cover for the union apparatus.

Over the MAB, *Socialist Worker* warns vaguely that there is “a real danger that those on the frontline of refusing to mark feel isolated and intimidated by bosses’ threats. Individual institutions must not be left to fight alone.” In fact, this is not a “danger”, but the

whole policy of the UCU bureaucracy, which *Socialist Worker* effectively endorses saying the union’s mandate for national strike action “should be the basis for a massive solidarity movement with all those MAB-ing and striking.”

For university workers to win the pay and conditions they need, and not just what the employers deem they can “afford” to give, the isolation of their struggle by the UCU must be broken. National strike action must be resumed and extended widely. School workers across the country are balloting for or planning action, creating the conditions for coordinated action.

But such a programme requires the creation of genuine rank-and-file organisations which can take the power out of the hands of the UCU bureaucracy under Grady and unify workers in every institution and all education sectors in a common fight for shared interests. 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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