

UK's University and College Union steps up efforts to end higher education workers' struggle

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The University and College Union (UCU) is deepening its efforts to strangle the fight by tens of thousands of higher education (HE) workers against real-terms pay cuts, excessive workloads, inequality and temporary, insecure contracts.

There have been no national strike days since March 22 despite a vote of 85.6 percent in favour of strikes on a 56.4 percent turnout in April, with only some teaching staff taking part in the ongoing marking and assessment boycott (MAB), and a handful of local strikes against punitive pay deductions for joining the boycott.

In an attempt to shut down the boycott entirely, the UCU agreed last week to a new meeting with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). Since imposing a pay deal of between 5 and 8 percent in March, the UCEA has insisted it will not consider any further increase, claiming not to have a “mandate from the sector” to increase a deal already at “the limit of affordability.”

Any deal coming out of such negotiations will be a betrayal of the determined struggle HE workers have waged, along the lines of the local settlement reached at Queen's University Belfast two weeks ago, where the UCU called off the marking boycott in exchange for a “cost of living supplement equivalent to 2 per cent of pay.”

Grady wrote in an email to members that “if any agreement is reached with UCEA this will be presented to members for a vote” and that “the MAB continues until members confirm they want it to stop.”

Grady was clearly nervous about a furious reaction like that which erupted in February when she called off seven days of national strike action without a vote, and

without having received any concrete offer. However, she is determined to bring industrial action to an end as soon as possible, and her promises of “a vote” are likely to mean only another manipulative e-ballot and attempts to browbeat members into accepting a sell-out.

As a face-saving measure, the letter from Grady to the UCEA said any agreement would be “based on the provisos” that pay deductions made during the marking boycott be returned to workers, who must have a “reasonable workload”, and that HE staff “continue to demand that UCEA improve pay to deal with the cost-of-living crisis.”

This was just for show and the provisos were dropped four days later when the UCEA replied offering talks on the basis that there were no “pre-conditions,” which the UCU immediately accepted. Grady justified this rapid reversal by declaring as a newly minted principle, “Meeting is always the right thing to do.”

The UCU also agreed to the demand for a review of “sector finances,” which the UCEA has repeatedly invoked as its excuse for opposing a pay rise, on the basis that 27 universities in the UK have a budget deficit.

Grady cynically accuses the UCEA of “refusing to address the marketised system that creates winners and losers” between universities, but in a joint letter from the UCU and four other campus trade unions to the UCEA on June 29, they resolved to “jointly agree on an external, independent facilitator for this exercise.”

The UCU's request for new talks with UCEA was made on June 30, following a meeting of the union's higher education committee (HEC) which voted to negotiate an “interim agreement” to suspend the marking boycott “as soon as is practical, and subject to

member consultation.” The HEC also rejected a motion for a one-week strike put by the UCU Left faction.

According to the UCU Left, the motion for an “interim agreement”, backed by Grady, passed by a single vote. She reportedly wanted to cancel any ballot over the summer, but the HEC did not approve such blatant strike breaking. This would be in direct defiance of the UCU’s congress in May, which passed a motion calling for a “long ballot commencing as soon as possible... in order to be able to take strike action from the start of the autumn term.”

The congress also passed a motion censuring Grady personally for anti-democratic scheming to “pause” strikes, which the motion referred to as a “tactical mistake which could lose the dispute.” A motion of no confidence was narrowly defeated. The censure went on to “reaffirm the sovereignty of Congress, sector conference and NEC/HEC decisions,” and “require, and seek assurance, that the [general secretary] abide by democratic decision making and processes in UCU.”

The decisions of the “sovereign” congress are again being undermined, with Grady having publicly attacked—only days after it passed—an anti-war motion on Ukraine which the congress voted for as official union policy, and now attempting to reverse the call for a ballot.

The congress motion followed several branch meetings in which motions of no confidence and censure were passed, underscoring the anger at the union leadership among UCU members. The fact that these motions did not begin a fight to oust Grady and take control of the dispute by rank-and-file workers is the political responsibility of her opponents in the UCU Left, which is led by the Socialist Workers Party.

The report in the *Socialist Worker* on the attempts to reach an agreement to end the marking boycott put forward a supposed plan to “save the university struggle from union leaders.” However, this is to take the form of official and unofficial “branch delegates meetings” (BDMs)—a talking shop for local officials and “activists.” BDMs, which the union calls regularly, are purely advisory, and Grady has ignored them whenever they disagreed with her campaign to demobilise HE workers.

An HEC member from the UCU Left told *Socialist Worker*, “Union activists now need to push for a branch

delegates meeting (BDM) so members have their say in how the dispute is going,” adding that they “also need to pass motions in our branches to say that the decisions made at congress need to be respected by union leaders”—an admission that the motion on congress’ “sovereignty” is a dead letter.

Grady has treated with contempt any notion of democratic control of the union by its members and made clear that such attempts to change policy through the union’s own channels will be ignored. While the reaction in the membership to her attempts to shut down industrial action has forced Grady to act more cautiously, *Socialist Worker*’s assertion that “workers have already overturned her previous attempts to derail the dispute—and they can do so again” conceals the vital fact that while Grady has been in charge of the dispute, she has succeeded in calling off strikes and signing the joint letter with the UCEA declaring an “impasse” on pay negotiations—which the UCEA used to begin imposing its below-inflation pay deal. She is still in a position to undermine HE workers’ struggle.

Unless a fight is taken up to take the dispute out of the hands of Grady and the UCU bureaucracy, workers will be fighting the employers with both hands tied behind their backs. The UCU Left is hostile to mobilising workers in rank-and-file committees outside of the bureaucracy’s control because it represents a rival faction of the same officialdom, primarily concerned that the too-open attempts to shut down the HE dispute risk discrediting the union apparatus that gives them a comfortable berth.



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