

University and College Union sanctions further UK strikes only to maintain control of its members

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The University and College Union (UCU) announced Monday it may sanction further strike action September over pay and conditions.

On Monday, the union announced its Higher Education Committee (HEC) had met and “voted to take further strike action before the end of September.”

This would go ahead “unless employer body UCEA [Universities and Colleges Employers Association] agrees to return to negotiations and end disruption to graduations.”

The UCU said it would “begin preparations for a new ballot in order to renew UCU’s industrial mandate in the pay and working conditions dispute, meaning disruption could continue this year and well into 2024.”

The decision was only taken after a branch delegates meeting last Friday had voted by a 98 percent majority to back further strikes. And no timetable is set for a new mandate ballot. In a communication to members on Monday, UCU leader Jo Grady said only that the union would “launch a rebalot in the pay and conditions dispute over the coming months”—meaning that no industrial action under a successful vote could be scheduled before the end of September, after the new term is already underway.

At most the union will allow a day or two of action under the current mandate for industrial action that expires on September 30. This means any higher education worker who continues the Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) taking place at 145 universities and involving thousands of staff—is at risk of losing their job if their action does not take place under a new mandate after September 30. Former member of the UCU higher education committee (HEC) Michael Carley warned that when the mandate expires, universities “will be legally entitled to demand that they do their marking, and to discipline them, or worse, if they refuse.”

Many Universities have already reacted aggressively to the marking boycott, some deducting 100 percent of pay.

The UCU’s real intentions can be gauged by its previous

betrayals, including calling off national strikes in recent months, in favour of a marking boycott. This handed the initiative to the employers, who have been able to impose a well below inflation 5 and 8 percent pay award and deepen attacks on working conditions.

The employers are refusing to tolerate the slightest concession. Last month UCEA suspended Queens University Belfast from membership after it reached agreement with the UCU to call off the marking boycott in exchange for a “cost of living supplement *equivalent to 2 per cent of pay.*”

Grady’s UCU Commons holds 13 seats of 41 on the HEC. The only HEC faction to explicitly support an early ballot was the UCU Left, led by the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP), 11 of whose HEC candidates were elected in March. But anyone looking to them for leadership will be cruelly disappointed.

At a meeting of over 600 UCU members on August 9, one UCU member said that despite the union’s “legal advice” that workers could be forced to mark after the boycott, she has “had massive deductions and there’s no way I’m going to do that marking.” In response the UCU Left’s Sean Wallis reiterated the union’s official position that “You cannot refuse a reasonable management instruction.”

Grady did not address the members’ meeting, and her name was barely mentioned. But her functionaries disabled the chat feature and read out only hand-picked comments/questions—starting with one which called UCEA’s below-inflation pay offer “generous” and suggesting the HEC should *apologise* to members for even calling the marking boycott.

One member pointed to the betrayed UCU Congress motion to lift the cap on payments from the national strike fund, and asked, “Why on earth should we think you’re listening to us this time?” He was told that the finances are “obviously confidential, they’re not to be widely discussed, but we have put as much money into that fighting fund as

has been found,” referring to the meagre £250,000 added in April—around two weeks’ membership dues.

The UCU Left and SWP formally maintain that if a few officials can be replaced by a new “militant” leadership, then the union can be transformed into a “democratic, accountable campaigning union.” But summing up at the end of an open meeting of the UCU Left, another of their HEC members, Peta Bulmer, said that whatever their criticisms of Grady, “it is very clear that she is sensitive to pressure from members and from branches.”

In their desperate attempt to prove that there is a progressive section of the bureaucracy that can be pressured from below, the UCU Left spent years promoting Grady. Following the departure of previous leader Sally Hunt after a rebellion against the UCU’s betrayal of the national pension strike in 2018, and despite running its own candidate in the 2019 leadership election, Grady’s victory as general secretary was hailed “a leap to the left” and “a rebirth of trade union democracy”.

It was only in 2021, after Grady had isolated and sold out a series of one-day strikes that the UCU Left discovered that “not much has changed compared to when Sally Hunt was secretary.” Even now, following the suffocation of a powerful national strike involving 50,000 workers in every university, they continue to promote the idea that Grady can be “pressured” into turning 180 degrees and carrying out the will of the membership.

The latest article published on the dispute in Socialist Worker Tuesday declares, “UCU union members forced their general secretary Jo Grady to concede and agree to hold a strike rebalot so they can take more action over pay and conditions.” UCU Left member Wallis adds, “Sometimes workers feel like they are not just battling the bosses but their ‘own side’ as well,” before reassuring everyone. “But what’s clear from this latest chapter is that it’s possible for rank and file members to overturn the decisions of the bureaucracy.” All that is required for victory is for union members to “push for ballots to be sent out as soon as possible and back the indefinite action that can win against the university bosses.”

The SWP advocates no struggle against the continued domination of the bureaucracy around Grady. They only offer to workers the chance of participating as foot-soldiers in supposedly “rank-and-file” structures controlled by the bureaucracy.

The SWP joins other pseudo-left opponents of the rank-and-file rebellion called for by the *World Socialist Web Site*, promoting a September “Workers Summit” called by regional branches of the National Education Union and other union organisations. This is based on a polite call to “reflect on the ‘deals’ that have come our way and discuss ways to

roundly reject bad deals that fall short of our demands.”

Writing on a similar “organising conference” held in June by SWP splinter group Counterfire, the WSWS explained:

The problem with the trade unions is not that bad leaders have somehow come to the head of otherwise representative organisations. The SWP’s implicit argument is that the rotten record of the unions is the result of the inactivity of the membership in holding these leaders to account.

In fact, the very structures of these organisations work to prevent genuine accountability and rank-and-file oversight of the conduct of industrial disputes. They are an apparatus for the control of the membership by a narrow, insulated layer. Within these organisations, a caste of bureaucrats sharing the same corporatist mindset has become entrenched, using its control of the union’s structures to ensure that only people of the same ilk attain any lasting position in office.

This layer actively resists any attempt to change the policy of the unions, and its resistance grows the more pressure is placed on it by the rank-and-file because its existence is incompatible with workers’ genuinely democratic organisation and pursuit of the class struggle.

The only way to protect pay and working conditions in the universities and the right to higher education is through forming rank-and-file committees *independent of the UCU apparatus*. Such organisations can spearhead the fight to defeat attacks on pay, conditions and pensions, defend workers against victimisation under the draconian anti-strike laws, and win the support of workers throughout the education sector for an offensive against the Tory government and the employers.



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