

University and College Union sabotages UK national higher education strike: Build rank and file committees to defend pay, conditions and pensions!

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University and College Union (UCU) members at just 42 universities, less than a third of universities nationally, began another round of strikes Monday for five days over pay and conditions. Members at just 10 more institutions are holding shorter walkouts.

This was the outcome of the decision by the UCU bureaucracy on September 15 at their Higher Education Committee (HEC) meeting to call off a national week-long strike at all universities. Instead, local union branches at 140 universities were told they could decide individually whether to withdraw from the walkout.

The winding down of the strikes follows the ending by the UCU of the national marking and assessment boycott on September 6. The UCU has now closed down all national industrial action in the dispute with the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association (UCEA) over pay, workloads, precarious contracts and equality.

UCU's General Secretary Jo Grady seized on the ending of the marking boycott to cement relations with the employers and end the national strike, declaring in a UCU press release on September 22, "We have seen many employers do the right thing and agree to stop punitive pay deductions and some have also agreed to return what has been taken. We are now urging other vice-chancellors to follow their lead and are calling off strike action at dozens of universities."

The splitting of a national strike into a series of isolated walkouts was justified by Grady cynically citing "the need for the union to develop a clear national strategy." It is the last action that can take place under a current mandate. An industrial action renewal ballot, as required under anti-strike legislation, was authorised by the bureaucracy from September 19, but will not close until November 3 which effectively rules out any further action until next year.

What was a national strike is now a chaotic mess, in which

some workers are going to work while their colleagues down the road, or even on the same campus, are on picket lines. At Glasgow Caledonian University, members of Unison walked out last week but members of the UCU returned to work the same day. Members of the UCU branch at the University of Nottingham were told late on Friday evening that, despite voting to strike all this week, they would be returning to work on Monday due to an "administrative error".

Responses from branches who voted not to strike indicate that HE workers have lost any faith in the UCU leadership carrying out a successful struggle after years of betrayals. The *Times Higher Education* reported, "At King's College London, union members agreed a local deal but stressed that the strikes had been called off because of the gap in mandates that had made continuous action impossible. A motion passed by the branch noted the resulting pointlessness of taking action... and the consequent loss of pay'."

It noted, "Other branches have gone further. Durham UCU members passed a motion by a 91 per cent majority calling for the resignation of Dr Grady. An open letter instigated by UCU's postgraduate researcher group that also called for her to go had been signed by dozens of academics at the time of writing."

There was enormous financial pressure on higher education workers to call off the strikes; many universities had already agreed local deals to return some of the pay deducted during the marking boycott, but only in return for "catching up" on marking by tight deadlines. At some universities this means thousands of pounds are at stake for workers, as academics who have continued to work full-time during the marking boycott have had a large proportion—or even 100 percent—of their salary withheld.

The University of Bath, cited as an example of an employer doing "the right thing" by Grady, set a deadline to

mark final-year undergraduate assessment for the first working day after the strike, so stopping work would have cost more than £1,000 for many workers, on top of lost wages for the week.

The marking and assessment boycott was ended by a 60 percent vote in an online poll. But that was after the union had already delayed a new ballot so that the boycott would end on September 30, however the members voted. Under the circumstances, decided by the union's HEC and justified by the pro-Grady UCU Commons faction, a narrow majority considered it better to call off the boycott a few weeks early.

The majority vote for ending the boycott came from UCU members who were not participating in it. The academics who had spent months and lost thousands of pounds on the marking boycott, determined not to see their sacrifice go to waste—after months of industrial action—voted by 63 percent to continue.

At the start of the national HE dispute, the UCU had promised to lead an “historic” fight to transform the sector. When the first national strike ballot in the current dispute ended in October 2022, Grady wrote “it's 150 bosses against 70,000 university workers who are ready and willing to bring the entire sector to a standstill.” In February 2023, after UCU members overwhelmingly rejected a below-inflation pay offer from UCEA, she wrote that the union “will take escalating action until we get a fair deal.”

Now the UCU has said in a press release that this week's strikes will only “be targeted at the very worst employers.”

Rather than “escalating action” the UCU has gradually wound down the national strikes and hived them off into a series of local, isolated walkouts. The last national strike day was on March 22, and since then only a few thousand teaching staff have been holding the marking boycott.

There have now been innumerable local settlements to the marking boycott. Educators at universities fighting pay deductions from the boycott and other issues have been isolated, such as the University of Brighton where workers have been on an indefinite strike since July over the loss of more than 100 jobs.

The local agreements were mostly for one-off payments, returning some of the pay withheld during the marking boycott. As with sellouts in disputes in other sectors since the beginning of the UK strike wave—including Royal Mail and health care workers—recent deals over pay at Queen's University Belfast and King's College London were all well below inflation. At King's College London, the marking boycott was called off in return for an £800 increase to the London Weighting—a pay rise of less than 2 percent for most UCU members—and some changes to parental leave and childcare subsidies. The deal at Queen's was also worth only around 2 percent of pay.

The UCU and other campus unions have signed up to UCEA's proposal for a “review of sector finances,” lining up with its insistence that any increase on the pay award between 5 and 8 percent imposed from February is “unaffordable” for many universities.

The UCU bureaucracy is aiming at establishing a close corporatist relationship with UCEA like the one it enjoys with the Association of Colleges (AoC) in further education. The UCU spent years lobbying the government, alongside the AoC, for further college funding, an excuse for preventing industrial action unless it considers the AoC's demands unsellable to its members. Last week the union issued a press release which did not criticise the AoC's recommendation of a below-inflation 6.5 percent pay rise, except on the grounds that it is not binding across all colleges.

The UCU Left, politically led by the Socialist Workers Party, argued of the curtailing of national action, “We could have won our dispute months ago if the HEC decision to move towards indefinite strike action earlier this year had been implemented rather than sabotaged.” But an indefinite strike would require an unrelenting struggle against the union bureaucracy, which the UCU Left as a component part of that bureaucracy is implacably opposed to.

The UCU Left's political bankruptcy is summed up in a statement Monday, which bleats pathetically, “The point of this review is not to recriminate about the errors of the General Secretary and her supporters.”

The UCU Left, educators should recall, described Grady's election as leader as a “leap” to the left.

The Educators Rank-and-File Committee, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, calls on educators to form rank-and-file committees *independent of the UCU apparatus*. These organisations, run democratically by educators themselves, 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 Conservative government and the employers.



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