

University and College Union sabotages UK national higher education strike

Our reporters
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What was a national higher education strike was driven into the ground last week by the University and College Union (UCU) bureaucracy.

Fifty thousand university workers had been due to walk out in a national stoppage at over 140 institutions in a fight against the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association (UCEA) over pay, workloads, precarious contracts and equality. Instead, the UCU leadership, just 10 days before the action started, told local branches they could decide individually whether to withdraw from the walkout. This resulted in workers at less than one third of universities (42) being involved in industrial action.

This sabotage took place alongside the UCU calling off a marking and assessment boycott (MAB), with many members who participated losing more than £1,000.

This week UCU headquarters sent a withdrawal of action notice to the University of Newcastle and London South Bank University, meaning that workers were not permitted to strike. At Newcastle, the local branch was forced to apologise after union leader Jo Grady stated that a "review" into the error would be conducted during the five planned days.

Management at many universities have utilised the marking boycott to enforce their diktats. In many cases, deals were reached with UCU branches locally to end the boycott—even before the union formally did—punishing those taking part by not handing back much of the pay deducted. The strike by workers at the University of Manchester, the largest single campus in the UK—which had begun on September 19—was ended just one day into the curtailed national action last Tuesday.

The local UCU branch announced it had reached "agreement locally with management which will see up to 75% of any pay docked over the marking boycott returned." UCU regional official Matt Arrowsmith declared, "We now call on other universities to follow Manchester's lead [!]. We are always willing to negotiate and strike action is always a last resort."

The leadership of the UCU have systematically whittled

down industrial action for months. Last week's strike was the first since March 22. On April 20, the UCU began the marking boycott nationally, claiming that this was evidence it was still involved in a struggle. At the end of May, the UCU Congress passed a motion censuring Grady for undemocratically pausing strikes and ordering her to "abide by democratic decision making and processes in UCU." The congress also passed a motion calling for a "ballot commencing as soon as possible." The ballot didn't start until September.

On June 29, the UCU and the other campus unions send a joint letter to UCEA agreeing to "meet to discuss sector finances and to jointly agree on an external, independent facilitator for this exercise." The following day, the UCU sent a letter to UCEA agreeing to enter talks, but with preconditions. The UCEA rejected the preconditions, but the UCU agreed to enter talks anyway, which began July 5.

On September 6, the UCU leadership ended the marking boycott, with workers given only around 12 hours' notice. Some 60 percent of UCU members in an online poll voted to end the boycott, on a small turnout, but out of those who were actually involved 63 percent voted to keep it going.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with striking workers at the **University of Sheffield**.

Nick, a Social Studies postgraduate researcher, said, "This strike is about pay, but our dispute over working conditions runs deep. At the University of Sheffield, we oppose the intransigence of the management and the culture of constant short-term contracts and keeping people hanging on for years hoping for a secure academic career. We're treated as disposable."

Describing the Marking and Assessment Boycott, Nick said, "Quite a number of staff have been involved in this action, although this has been variable across departments. The university management has deducted full pay for those taking part. I would've liked to take strike action earlier in this dispute to escalate to all-out action as soon as the pay deductions began. Within the union, it feels like there's been barriers to doing that."

“The role of the general secretary in stalling every action we could take is a problem. We need a strategy that our members can get behind that won’t be sidelined.

“We have a new ballot and it’s important that we achieve a ‘yes’ vote. Lots of people ask ‘What are we going to do with that mandate?’ If we do get a ‘yes’ vote, what will the strategy be?”

“Going local risks some institutions left behind that are less organised. It’s not the right way to proceed.

“The MAB is an individualized experience. You’re on your own and you have to say to your boss ‘No I can’t do this marking.’ Some people have found it more difficult to participate than in a strike. That decreased the momentum.

“The big question for us is: how to get the dispute back on track? Many people feel it’s being wound down. There have been multiple attempts to end the dispute completely.”

Dave, from the Information School, explained, “As lecturers, there’s too many classes and much work for the hours that we’re given. We’re expected to give literally 110 percent of our time.”

Catherine and **Merial**, lecturers in the School of Education, said they were on strike “because of the way that the university has handled the Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) and the punitive deductions they’ve made.”

Referring to an “ongoing and hostile attitude to the workers”, they said, “It’s part of a spreadsheet-isation of the university! We’re treated as units and hourly resources, not people, without dialogue, and real care for students’ needs. The endpoint is to stop treating staff as whole people with their own journey, so they can be dismissed after a short-term contract or given inappropriate work.

“Throughout this ongoing dispute, the UCU strategy is lacking. Nationally, there’s no clear road to resolving the dispute. The strikes have been very intermittent, a day here and a day there. I’ve been involved in industrial action every year since I started.”

Isabelle, an associate professor at the **University of Leeds**, said, “There has been a fragmentation of the dispute because the Higher Education Committee gave the decision to the local level about what to do. This put some people off because the original mandate was for this week to have a strike everywhere. The marking and assessment boycott has been disrupting on the one hand but not successful completely because not everyone was doing it.

“The decision to end it was the result of an e-ballot of members and the stoppage has created many problems because we have new deadlines we have to meet to return the marks and these are creating unreasonable workloads. The reason why people voted to stop it was because they realized it wasn’t delivering the outcome that we hoped for. If we had at least 60 percent of workers not marking, then

the university probably would have considered more.

“This is six years” that the workers have been fighting for their demands, and we have received some benefits, but in terms of pay, we haven’t achieved anything. After so long, the ability of people to strike is almost exhausted.

“People feel very detached from the unions. Even myself, I haven’t voted for the representatives for the last couple of years.”

Steve, a post-doctoral researcher at Leeds University said, “Universities, as a sector, need to put in the effort to make this the place we want to work. We can build together a sector that educates and delivers research or we can be a corporation making money. I certainly know which side I’m on. We are here to campaign for secure and well-paid employment.

“We have to look at escalation. For one reason or another we’ve been on and off strikes for years. Our pensions have been restored, but we need to see meaningful movement by employers on pay and on conditions. After a few years, pay has moved by 3 percent. That’s not enough.

“We have to organize. We have to build our strengths, and we have to use our strengths. The decision-making needs to be from the ground up.”

Amanda said, “I work for the Business School in Leeds and I am a Grade 4 worker and I am earning the bare minimum for someone to live comfortably on a single income. Fortunately, I am married but we are reviewing our finances, and if he were to lose his job, I would not even be able to afford to get to my job on my salary. We wouldn’t be able to survive. If it were just me, I would not even be able to live in Leeds. I know there are workers who are in a much worse position. I have colleagues who have second jobs and are going to food banks.

“We are out over fair pay and a review of the job grading scale and the ‘spine points’ they use within grades that are unfair. We haven’t had a pay rise to match inflation. People are getting tired. There’s not a whole lot of progress in terms of useful negotiations.”



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