

University and College Union capitulates, ending years long UK higher education dispute

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The University and College Union (UCU) used the results of its most recent strike ballot in the long-running dispute in higher education (HE) to close down a dispute going back five years over pay, conditions and pensions.

More than 68 percent of those who voted, 19,722 HE workers, indicated they were prepared to strike, and over 75 percent were in favour of action short of a strike, but only 43 percent of eligible voters took part. Under the Trade Union Act 2016, no strike can be called without a 50 percent turnout.

The UCU bureaucracy feigned outrage over anti-democratic legislation the trade unions have never challenged. This is a cover for shutting down strikes it opposed from the very start. In its press release, the UCU denounced the law for “frustrating the wishes of members who voted for strike action over pay and working conditions,” but the failure of the third ballot—after two votes in favour of strikes over the last year—is a vote of no confidence in the bureaucracy.

It is the UCU which has frustrated and wore down HE workers’ determination to fight.

In November 2022, UCU members voted to strike for a pay rise of RPI inflation plus 2 percent, and over casualisation, inequality and workloads. This was separate from the dispute over pensions which began in 2018. The pension dispute recently ended after UCU members voted to accept an offer to reverse most of the pension cuts pushed through in April last year, although high inflation in the past year means the pre-April 2022 pension is now worth far less.

The UCU responded to the huge mandate for strikes over pay by calling only three strike days that term. During longer strikes in February 2023, the union suspended the final two weeks of walkouts after its General Secretary Jo Grady announced a “significant breakthrough” in confidential negotiations at the ACAS conciliation service. Only *after* calling off strikes did it send an online vote to its members asking them to “support the principle of the

union’s pausing action... to allow negotiations.”

In March, universities began to impose a pay rise of between 5 and 8 percent, a pay cut relative to inflation, which UCU members had massively rejected. Against the will of its members, the UCU effectively accepted this as the end of the pay dispute.

Not a single day of national strike action has been called since March 22, despite a ballot in April returning an 85.6 percent vote to strike. Instead, the UCU called a marking and assessment boycott, in which only a minority of members were able to participate, as not every UCU member marks exams. Some HE workers lost thousands of pounds in pay, while others were frozen out of the fight. The boycott was called off at the start of September following an online poll in which 60 percent voted to end it, but 63 percent of those boycotting marking wanted to continue.

This vote was a recognition of the *fait accompli* which the UCU engineered using the 2016 anti-strike law. By delaying the start of the strike ballot until near the end of September, in violation of its own congress’ decision in May to start balloting “as soon as possible,” the union ensured it could not legally continue the boycott beyond September 30.

Finally, after announcing a five-day strike at the end of the mandate, the union’s Higher Education Committee (HEC) subsequently ruled that local branches could decide for themselves whether to take part, fracturing the national strike. A majority of UCU branches decided not to walk out and the local bureaucracy in a number of institutions ensured that if strikes did go ahead they were quickly ended in a shoddy deal, as was the case at the University of Manchester.

The low turnout in the ballot is proof that workers are completely disenfranchised by the union bureaucracy. Multiple votes to strike, endless “pressure” placed on union officials, even motions to censure Grady passed at the congress and by branches, were unable to force the apparatus to lead the struggle workers were seeking.

The UCU used the ballot result to abandon any notion of mobilising the working class to defend pay and conditions. Instead, it has endorsed a campaign of corporatism, planning a close working relationship with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), and appeals to the pro-business Labour Party.

Grady wrote that although the lack of a mandate for strikes “could have led to an emboldened approach from the employer,” she was “pleased to say that UCEA have recognised the strength of feeling” and wanted to negotiate with the unions “with a view to bringing much needed long-term stability to our sector.”

In its post titled “Breaking the cycle” which Grady approvingly cited, the UCEA wrote that it wanted to “avoid a continuing pattern of disputes in response to the outcome of pay negotiations with limited ?nances.” The “stability” sought by both UCEA and the unions is for the employers and unions to come up with a figure they claim is affordable, and workers to accept it.

The UCU and other unions on campuses have indicated their agreement with UCEA’s suggestion that a “review” of the finances of higher education is needed. This has long been part of the universities’ claim that further pay rises are “unaffordable.” The lack of funding for education is something the UCU does not even suggest fighting, despite last year’s massive mobilisations in universities, colleges and schools.

Grady’s only response to the anti-strike laws was to say the union “look[s] forward to a Labour government rolling back the anti-union laws,” as suggested by Labour’s deputy leader Angela Rayner at the Trades Union Congress in September. Previous Labour governments have left intact industrial relations laws banning secondary strike action and introducing expensive ballot requirements.

The UCU bureaucracy will not defend anything, as shown by its inability to defend democratic rights against the Tory government’s witch-hunt of opponents of Israel’s genocide in Gaza. The equality, diversity and inclusion advisory group of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the government body responsible for research funding, was suspended at the request of the Secretary of State for Science Michelle Donelan after she accused two of its members of “extremist” views, *Nature* reported.

One panel member reportedly wrote on Twitter that the government’s attacks on pro-Palestine demonstrators based on the slander that they support terrorism were “disturbing,” and the other described Israel’s attacks on Palestinians as “genocide and apartheid.”

More than 3,300 academics signed an open letter calling for UKRI to reject Donelan’s demands, and more than a dozen resigned from voluntary posts at UKRI. Grady said

the union’s response would not be a campaign of industrial action but would consist of “engaging all political parties,” encouraging members who are targeted by the witch-hunt against critical academics to “submit a subject access request,” and planned “petitions, letter-writing and much more.”

Grady’s nominal opponents from within the union bureaucracy, in the UCU Left faction led by the Socialist Workers Party, responded to the ballot result by again promoting illusions that the union could be reformed if only it was led by the right people. Grady herself was elected in 2018 due to opposition to previous General Secretary Sally Hunt’s attempts to sell out the pension dispute, and her victory was celebrated by the UCU Left as “a rebirth of trade union democracy” and a “leap” to the left.

Now the UCU Left wants workers to forget the betrayal by the latest “reformer” placed in charge of the unaccountable union apparatus, and place a “left” in the same post. Pointing to the elections taking place between January and March 2025, it wrote workers could have “a GS [general secretary], Presidential team, and NEC [national executive committee] that are committed to democracy through our sovereign structures, to implemented policy efficiently, and to deliver the win our members sorely need on pay and conditions.”

Hedging their bets and hoping to establish a close working relationship with the next general secretary, as they did for years with Grady, the UCU Left’s election statement mentions and praises a rival candidate, Vicky Blake, before it even names their own candidate.

What all the factions of the UCU bureaucracy have in common is opposition to a mobilisation of the membership against its unaccountable structure. The total hostility of the bureaucracy to workers’ wish to fight must be met by a wide-scale rebellion and the building of democratic structures, rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and directed against their collusion with employers and the government.

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