

University and College Union leader Jo Grady awarded massive pay rise, as members sold out in UK national strike

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24 March 2024

At the start of March, Jo Grady was re-elected on the narrowest of margins for a second five-year term as general secretary of the University and College Union (UCU).

The election was held in the aftermath of last year's strikes over cuts to the University Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension and what the union bureaucracy coined the "Four Fights": pay, workloads, insecure contracts and inequality. These struggles, going back six years in the case of the pension fight, were betrayed by the UCU.

Only 15.1 percent of the union's 114,310 eligible members voted in the election for the general secretary, with Grady taking just 5,990 first-preference votes, and winning with 182 more votes than runner-up Ewan McGaughey, after votes were transferred from the other candidates, Saira Weiner and Vicky Blake.

The results expressed no confidence in all factions of the bureaucracy: from Grady, who openly manoeuvred to limit workers to token walkouts and shut down a marking boycott, to her nominal opponents in the UCU Left faction—led by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP)—which sought to redirect all expressions of workers' anger at the undermining of strikes into "pressure" on a hostile bureaucracy, within which it plays a major role.

McGaughey, president of the UCU local branch at Kings College London (KCL) received his share of votes largely because he did not play as visible a role in the disastrous Four Fights dispute as Grady or the UCU Left. But local officials were just as responsible for the strikes' betrayal. The branch at KCL was the second to pull out of the national marking boycott for a mere £800 increase to the London pay weighting and a handful of other benefits, giving the kiss of death to the unified national dispute.

All four candidates celebrated the outcome of the pension dispute in their election statements. Grady declared it "the biggest victory for workers in recent years", while the UCU Left's Weiner wrote that "victory on USS pensions shows that action delivers results". Blake referred vaguely to

"Successes across Further and Higher Education" and McGaughey implied the limited reversal of the pension directors original cuts plan was because he and a group of officials had just been granted leave to appeal a ruling against their lawsuit over the cuts.

None discussed that pensions are now, in real terms, lower than before the cuts were made. Although USS agreed to restore some benefits, with an additional increase of £215 to annual pensions and a lump-sum of £645, this is far below the increase in prices of 25.9 percent (using RPI inflation) or 14.5 percent (CPIH inflation) since the cut was made in April 2022.

Only around 40 percent of UCU members are enrolled in the USS pension scheme. Academics at post-1992 institutions are mostly enrolled in the Teachers' Pensions Scheme (TPS), while non-academic HE workers are covered by the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS). Employers' contributions to TPS will soon rise. *Times Higher Education* reported that the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) and Universities UK had written to the higher education minister to ask for "greater flexibility" in allowing staff to enrol in TPS, i.e. to start enrolling them in the much cheaper LGPS. The UCU's only response has been to call its members to write to their MPs and demand the Conservative government to provide money for universities to cover the increased contributions.

The "Four Fights" ended with no "victory" on any point. A below-inflation pay increase of between 5 and 8 percent was imposed, and little was achieved on workloads, temporary contracts and equality beyond the establishment of joint employer-trade union "working groups." Although UCU members rejected the "terms of reference" for such a corporatist proposal last year, the UCU and four other unions last week submitted new terms of reference to the UCEA before negotiations resume.

Conditions in universities continue to deteriorate, with hundreds of job cuts looming. The UCU will not wage any

serious fight to save jobs. It consistently demands the withdrawal only of “compulsory redundancies”, leaving universities a free hand to reduce the workforce through “voluntary” redundancy and early retirement. One example among many is the University of Aberdeen, where the union called off a six-day strike due to begin March 12, after the university withdrew 26 compulsory redundancies. However, the university’s senior vice-principal hailed “clear signs of progress towards cost savings,” *STV* reported, indicating many jobs were already lost.

The trade union bureaucracy is a privileged social layer which ruthlessly defends its own material interests. While trampling all over UCU members’ demand for real pay increases, Grady had already secured herself a massive £18,000 annual rise, receiving £154,558 in the year to August 2023. This consists of basic pay of £127,690, and a further £26,868 in remuneration and benefits. In Britain, pay above £81,357 is in the top 5 percent bracket.

Grady’s pay increase was only revealed to the membership by the UCU after the close of the vote to elect the new leadership. *FE Week* noted that Grady’s pay lift was 16.3 percent more than 2021-22, “which breaks the general secretary’s 2019 manifesto pledge to never take a salary boost above the national offer in FE [further education].” The pay offer for workers in Further Education for 2022-23 was a mere 2.5 percent.

UCU’s response to reports of the pay rise was that it was not really an increase, because it came out of money that Grady normally donates to the union’s strike fund. The fact that the money comes out of the strike fund rather than the rest of the union’s significant financial reserves is, if anything, worse.

The University of Sheffield UCU branch passed a motion calling for an investigation into Grady’s income, how much her donations to the strike fund were, and whether union funds were used for her election campaign. Grady’s supporters often allude to her giving large sums, but this is not recorded in any official accounts. *FE Week* quoted a union spokesperson’s arrogant response, “the media are sadly doing the bosses bidding by bizarrely attempting to spin a union official donating tens of thousands of pounds to her members as a negative.”

Attempting to placate angry members to forget the betrayals of last year, the pro-Grady UCU Commons faction now calls for “unity”. Revealingly, it hailed the “alliance-building” by the “left” in the National Education Union (NEU), which it claimed helped “fight back against the de-professionalisation of teachers and the attacks on public schooling.” The reality is that the NEU sold out the strike of teachers for a fully funded above-inflation pay rise for a below-inflation increase, half of which came out of stretched

school budgets!

While Grady was elected to the highest position in the union, the UCU Left is now the largest faction in the National Executive Committee, and it claims to have a “comfortable majority” when its members and those closely aligned are counted. The pseudo-left has previously occupied a commanding position within the union, carrying on seamlessly from their erstwhile opponents. The UCU Left backed the original election of Grady, hailing it a “leap to the left”.

Despite the infighting between the factions, all of them are united in their opposition to the perspective fought for by the Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee, of an independent struggle of workers to free themselves from all factions of the bureaucracy, based on an alternative political perspective.

In an interview with *Socialist Worker*, UCU Left candidate Weiner acknowledged the obvious, stating that “Lots of members don’t trust the leadership”. Weiner explained “[w]e know the way unions work is to do deals and to compromise and the only counter-pressure is the organised grassroots of the union”. She claimed to be leading the fight for a union “controlled by the members.” What this really amounts to is a call to elect representatives of the pseudo-left to positions within the bureaucracy. This was summed up by Weiner’s statement that if she wins the position of general secretary, “I see that will be a spur to more rank-and-file organisation and pressure”.

Grady’s trajectory is the path taken by every left-talking bureaucrat. Pseudo-left groups such as the SWP specialise in using militant rhetoric about rank-and-file reform to defend their own privileges and strengthen the bureaucracy, while closing ranks against the membership in order to block any independent struggle against the assault on education.



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