

Further Education workers strike 17 colleges in England as University and College Union stifles action

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Workers at 17 Further Education (FE) colleges across England began a three-day walkout on Wednesday.

University and College Union (UCU) members at 33 colleges overwhelmingly rejected a non-binding pay offer of 4 percent from the Association of Colleges (AoC). However, by the time of the walkout, the UCU had already pulled action at half the colleges which voted to strike.

The union is splitting FE workers into a handful of local disputes, ending them one-by-one with pay deals that do not make up for years of real-terms cuts as workers seek to close the £9,000 gap between salaries in schools and colleges. Although the headline demand is for a pay rise of 10 percent or £3,000, whichever is higher, the UCU is boasting of pulling branches out of the strike when they have “won pay awards worth *up to 8.7%*.”

Low pay is a sector-wide problem caused by the cuts of successive Conservative and Labour governments. According to a 2025 report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), “[f]unding per student in FE colleges is 11 per cent lower than in 2010-11, while sixth form funding has fallen by 23 per cent.” Classroom-based adult education funding has been cut by 40 percent in real terms since 2009-10.

The extra £300 million announced by the Labour government in its Autumn 2024 budget for the 2025-2026 financial year does not begin to close the gap: it is only just enough to cover the increase in student numbers and inflation.

Insecure contracts are also common. The UCU published research in 2019 showing that 38.8 percent of FE lecturers had a casualised contract—either a fixed-term contract, zero-hours or other hourly contract—or were employed through an agency. Despite this, the UCU did not put forward secure contracts as a demand in this

week’s strikes.

The need for a joint struggle of all FE colleges is clear, but it will not be organised by the UCU bureaucracy which is openly opposed to mobilising workers across the sector. Its strategy is to lobby the government and employers. The UCU’s “New Deal For FE” campaign is run entirely on this basis.

The UCU’s latest members’ newsletter (January 9) claims that it is winning a response from the government following UCU general secretary Jo Grady giving evidence last year to Parliament’s Education Committee Inquiry into Further Education and Skills. It cites Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s comment regarding the pay gap between colleges and schools that he will “have a look at it and talk to the Treasury about it”.

This cannot even be described as an empty promise, committing the government to nothing, even in words. Meanwhile the Labour government continues to aim at cutting benefits and social services as part of its pro-business, militarist agenda.

Moves to split up the dispute in FE began at the union’s May 2025 congress, which voted for “branch autonomy” in opting in or out of any strike ballot. On this basis The Manchester College—the UK’s largest FE college with around 23,000 students and 1,700 staff—was not even balloted to join the dispute.

What was referred to as a “national ballot” was disaggregated into separate ballots at 54 college groups. Although the total turnout was 50.6 percent—just above the 50 percent threshold set by the anti-strike laws which the Labour government is retaining—21 of the individual ballots did not meet the threshold, preventing over 3,500 workers from joining the strikes.

That only just over half of UCU members at the balloted colleges even returned a ballot showed many have no

faith that a fight left in the hands of the union bureaucracy can be won. The turnout of only 39.3 percent in last year's national Higher Education ballot covering universities—the second successive year in which a ballot has not met the threshold to hold a strike—shows the same issue faces workers in all education sectors.

Several of the remaining 33 colleges made separate deals, so that the UCU announced only 25 colleges would walk out between January 14 and 16. This fell to only 17 by the first strikes on Wednesday, after another eight UCU branches pulled out in the two days before the strike—some for a separate pay deal and some with only a promise of further talks. These included Sheffield College, one of the largest in the UK.

The offers which were either accepted or used as the pretext to suspend strikes are telling, being far below workers' demands and in many cases little better than the AOC's 4 percent offer which was already rejected.

At City of Bristol College, the UCU cancelled the strike for "further negotiations on pay scales." At Abingdon and Witney College in Oxford, the UCU branch suspended the walkout for talks on a "new offer" of a 4 percent pay rise for all staff and some additional measures on workloads.

At Myerscough College in Lancashire, the UCU agreed to accept a 4 percent pay rise, changes to the pay structure which will increase some workers' pay further, an increased starting salary for lecturers and two days' extra annual leave. On the first day of the strike the branch at Lancaster and Morecambe College announced a similar deal.

After the three-day walkout this week, no further action is currently planned. Instead, there are weeks of delays while local branches meet and a special meeting of the UCU's Further Education Committee is held on February 6 to "consider branch and member feedback" and "next steps".

Even where pay increased by more than the last year's 4.1 percent price rises (by the RPI measure of inflation), without further funding from central government it will come out of already stretched college budgets, raising the risk of workers' paying for their own pay rise with job losses and increased work pressure.

Forcing through localised deals means the remaining striking workers, those who are last to even get an offer, are in an ever weaker position. The bureaucracy defends its actions by saying that FE colleges are responsible for setting their own pay terms, with no binding national bargaining, accepting this is a *fait accompli*. Claiming that it is "at this level, not the national level, where the power

lays," it tells workers to "react to the existing structural, legal, and power realities."

All but admitting that its strategy is based on preemptively accepting defeat, the UCU states baldly that the "central premise of a New Deal for FE is that UCU is not yet ready to achieve fundamental change at sector level and any precipitate move will most probably take the union and our strategic demands backwards rather than forward."

This flies in the face of the guiding principle of the workers' movement that "an injury to one is an injury to all". The true "power reality" is that it is FE workers who are the lifeblood of the sector, and who have the power, precisely "at sector level", through a unified struggle, to enforce their demands for decent terms of employment and a high quality of education.

The FE sector in the UK serves around 2 million students, with roughly 1.6 million in England alone. The total FE workforce in England including college, work-based, and adult learning providers is estimated at over 326,000. But this powerful force is paralysed by a union leadership opposed to a genuine struggle to win the many billions of pounds required to adequately fund the sector.

Further Education workers must take steps to bring the dispute under their direct control through rank-and-file committees at each college, whose first principles are: firstly, to fight for what workers *need* not what the college groups and government say they must accept; secondly, that the struggle must be waged on a unified basis among as wide a section of the workforce as possible.

Contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today to discuss these critical issues and how to take up the organising of a rank-and-file committee where you are.



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