

For a rank-and-file response to the UCU's sabotage of Further Education strikes

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The three-day strike of 17 colleges across England last week highlighted the challenges facing Further Education workers.

What could have been a powerful united fightback across the sector was split up into local disputes which have been rapidly shut down. Even the figure of 17 was barely half the 33 colleges who voted to walk out, with the rest demobilised to vote on deals all below the pay demand of 10 percent.

The latest deal announced as a “victory” at Sheffield College added only 2 to 3 percent on top of a 2 percent pay rise which was given in August to reach a total of 5 percent for lecturers and 4 percent for other workers.

The University and College Union (UCU) leadership under general secretary Jo Grady excluded from the very beginning a unified struggle in which members could stand together until everyone had won their demands. These are, according to the union: a 10 percent or £3,000 pay rise, parity with schoolteacher pay within 3 years, a minimum starting salary of £30,000, reform of the pay spine, equalities gaps closed, national agreements on workload, a return to national bargaining and putting FE at the heart of a new government's plans

Such a fight would require a battle with the Labour Party government which is systematically starving the sector of funding—maintaining funding per student in FE colleges at levels 11 per cent lower than in 2010-11, and 23 percent lower in sixth forms. But the UCU does everything possible to maintain ties with Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

The UCU's strategy for defeat

Since her election in 2019, Grady has epitomised the

left-talking trade union bureaucrat, delivering radical-sounding speeches while demobilising action by UCU members, preserving relations with employers and the government. She was a leading figure—alongside Rail, Maritime and Transport union leader Mick Lynch—in Enough is Enough, which directed mass sentiment for a general strike in 2022-23 into calls for a Labour government.

Grady won election following a mass rebellion within the UCU against her predecessor Sally Hunt in 2019. Hunt had sold out the pensions dispute in Higher Education. But having gained her position with a few left phrases, Grady proceeded to wind down the “Four Fights” dispute.

FE workers should study the fight against job losses in Higher Education, which was divided and betrayed in exactly the same way as their own struggle. The UCU announced in October last year that by the time it opened a national strike ballot for demands including an end to redundancies, 15,000 university jobs had already been lost.

The year leading up to that point saw the UCU claim victory after victory in local disputes over job losses, almost invariably with an agreement to stop only *compulsory* redundancies. Thousands of workers were pressured to take “voluntary” redundancy or early retirement by the threat that new cuts would be made if they didn't. Many of the “victories” came simply because the universities could cut the jobs they were planning to without resorting to compulsory redundancies.

By the time the national ballot was held, members had so little confidence in the UCU leading a serious struggle to defend jobs and funding—not helped by pathetic pleas to the Labour government to “stop looking the other way”—that only 39 percent of HE members participated in the vote.

The universities have taken advantage of the UCU's

divide and rule to force through more job cuts and reprisals for striking. Workers at the University of Sheffield have been told that if they do not reschedule classes which fell on strike days in November and December, and for which they have already lost pay, their future wages will not be paid.

The UCU Left faction

Within the union, the UCU Left, politically led by the Socialist Workers Party, is the most prominent faction calling for a united struggle in FE. But it provides no strategy for doing so beyond running for positions within the union and seeking to encourage its leaders to be more militant.

In 2019, although opposing her candidacy, the UCU Left welcomed the election of Grady—a bureaucrat soon to be taking home more than £150,000 in pay and benefits—with the promise that it would “look forward to working with [her] to transform UCU into a democratic fighting union that can send shivers down the spine of every employer.”

In the run up to the FE strike, UCU Left covered for the bureaucracy’s pre-emptive sabotage of the dispute at the union’s May 2025 Congress. Delegates voted in favour of “branch autonomy” to pull out of the strike or even not to ballot their members and voted down a proposal for an aggregated national ballot.

Rather than warn about the impending betrayal of the united fightback FE workers need, the UCU Left report on the conference inverted reality: “While one motion discussed branches ‘opting out’, this was amended to encourage all branches to unite. The overwhelming majority of motions from branches supported a collective approach.” But these endorsed joint industrial action in principle, without challenging the formal division into separate disputes.

Whereas the Higher Education Sector Conference did vote for an industrial dispute directly with the Labour government, UCU Left endorsed purely local disputes in FE, writing “given the scale of the crisis facing post-16 education we cannot afford to prioritise this over moving to industrial action against the employers now.”

In December, UCU Left expressed its “frustration” and “disappointment” that the union’s Further Education Committee voted for fewer strike days than it proposed

and rejected re-balloting branches which missed the 50 percent threshold. Acknowledging that “each branch that drops out weakens our collective strength,” it proposed no action by members, instead promising on their behalf to “demand national action from our union”.

During the strike held January 14-16, the SWP confined itself to offering a few polite words of advice. An article in the *Socialist Worker* acknowledged that the strikes are being wound down but could only respond, “Activists at other colleges should argue for more action, and push the union to call more than token strikes.”

For rank-and-file control

The whole trajectory of Grady’s leadership since UCU members forced out Sally Hunt shows what will come of “pushing the union”. Workers need their own bases of power and organisation to exert democratic control over their disputes: rank-and-file committees which can link up colleges in a fight against any attempt to isolate and betray the strikes.

As a first step, all deals currently being voted on should be rejected, and collective action resumed. No workplace should fight alone; no one should be left behind.

In this way, the dispute can be made the first step of a sector-wide fight for improvements in pay, job security and working conditions. FE workers’ allies are not to be found in the Labour government, but throughout higher, primary and secondary education and in the wider working class. They can find enormous support for a struggle against Starmer’s starving basic social services to fuel a money and war-mad ruling elite.



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