

Imperial College London staff strike over pay: “Our effective pay has been cut by 9 percent since 2018”

Our reporters
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University staff at Imperial College London walked out Tuesday on their third one-day strike of February. They have now held 13 strike days since a ballot in September last year. Members of the University and College Union (UCU), Unite and Unison trade unions rejected the 2025/6 pay award of only 2 percent—a real-terms cut compared with inflation, which is currently at 3.8 percent by the RPI measure.

The 2 percent was imposed on all pay grades, leaving the lowest paid hardest hit by cost-of-living increases. The university claimed that the imposed pay award was benchmarked against other London universities, but now admits this was calculated using incorrect data.

Workers are demanding a 7.2 percent pay rise to reverse real-terms pay cuts since 2018, with an additional £2000 payment for lower-paid workers, two weeks’ paid carers’ leave and 30 days of annual leave. A UCU official told the WSWS that Imperial staff have five fewer days of annual leave than the sector average. The unions also call for a “working group to explore a four-day week”, which commits the university to nothing concrete.

According to the UCU, Imperial’s teaching income increased by £55 million in 2024, enough to pay for all workers’ demands.

Struggles against job losses and to defend pay and conditions are breaking out across higher education. In February alone there were strikes at the University of Essex, Northumbria University, Southampton Solent University, Edinburgh Napier University. Ten days of strike action at University of Sheffield International College were suspended at the eleventh hour by the UCU for further talks with management, allowing for redundancies and redeployment to proceed.

Workers voted for strike action at Aberdeen, Stirling, Durham, Strathclyde and Heriot-Watt, and many more are holding action short of strikes or balloting to strike.

The unions are keeping these dozens of disputes isolated from each other.

A WSWS reporting team spoke to strikers on the picket line at Imperial.

Oisín, a teaching fellow in design engineering, said, “We’re striking for fair pay because our effective pay has been cut by 9 percent since 2018, while income from tuition fees is rising.”

He left research for teaching due to the “lack of stability because of short contracts” and “the additional stress” on precarious staff. Many researchers felt unable to strike because “it would hurt their career significantly more than it would hurt Imperial, which limits their collective bargaining ability.”

Oisín said, “There are similar disputes occurring across a range of world-leading universities”. Pay erosion and insecurity “drives people away from academia where they might be able to have more significant impacts, drives people away from teaching the next generation skills.”

Research fellow in fluid dynamics, Lyes, said the pay offer “is not in accordance with inflation, and it’s becoming very, very heavy to us. If you wake up in the morning and worry how you will pay your bills, of course it will impact your mindset. It will also impact your ability to conduct good research.”

He pointed to the collapse of infrastructure on campus. “Despite all the hundreds of millions, I don’t know what they do with that money because the infrastructure inside is degraded.”

The on-campus coffee shops have been replaced with

corporate chains. “Staff don’t get subsidised any more at all. In fact, there’s two prices. There’s the student price, which is lower, and the staff price, which is higher, but it’s quite high for both of us.”

Jeffrey, a teaching fellow in the Faculty of Medicine, said UCU members include “lots of people who are struggling. I met a colleague today who’s in the union that feels she can’t join the strike today because of childcare costs. It’s things like that that mean that at the end of the month, a lot of our colleagues have very little left over.”

With job cuts at universities across the country, “It’s at times like this that you realise that any illusion you might have had that you’re a privileged sector of workers disappears. You can be made redundant just like anyone else.”

At Imperial “so far, redundancies haven’t been talked about openly, but we do know that over the past 10 years, restructurings have happened in different units, for example, the ICT unit (Information Technology support service department). Those restructurings have led to job losses, which go largely under the radar.”

Thousands of jobs have been lost in restructuring and “voluntary redundancy” schemes across the UK. In all these disputes, the UCU has called only for an end to *compulsory* redundancies.

Jeffrey spoke about the broader role of education, “I think we’ve allowed ourselves to be caught up in agendas about things like employability. Now you can see why a student thinks, if I’m paying £9,000 a year, if I’m paying £49,000 a year as some of our overseas students are, I want to be sure there’s a job at the end of it.

“But the point of a university isn’t just to churn out oven-ready graduates for the employers... It should be about developing the intellect, the character, the critical functions of graduates, otherwise, we’re just a sort of very expensive job training scheme.”

Jemil, who works in the maintenance and engineering team said: “I ended up having to sell my car.” Since then, “all those savings that I made by not having a car have been totally eroded through food and utility bills. I am now pretty much worse off than I was before.”

The 2 percent pay rise “is quite insulting. We do something like 16 buildings of the 36 buildings that are here on the one side, and I don’t do anything less on a 12-hour day than 25,000 steps: roughly 50 miles every

two weeks, a lot of mileage on your feet with your tools.”

While workers struggle with living costs, the number of managers on six-figure salaries expands. “It really does feel like there’s a lot of top-heavy management,” said Jemil.

If employers are able to divide and conquer the workforce, it is only thanks to the trade union bureaucracy which blocks any unified struggle.

Thousands of jobs were lost in 2025 despite repeated “victories” announced by the UCU when universities agreed to make cuts through *voluntary* redundancy schemes. The result has been many thrown out of work and increased pressure on the remaining workers as student numbers increase.

The diversion of the dispute into lobbying of parliament and isolated action resulted in such a loss of confidence in the bureaucracy that when it finally did call a national strike ballot, only 39 percent of members voted, short of the 50 percent threshold set by the anti-strike laws.

The further education dispute which led to three days of strikes in January was similarly divided, with the 33 colleges who voted to strike quickly whittled down by separate deals to 17 by the time walkouts began. The UCU has now declared that “branches themselves will now decide what further strike action they wish to take at a time that best suits them”, i.e., every college will be left to fight alone.

Workers across the education sector are entering into struggle over the same issues as their colleagues at Imperial. To link up their struggles and wage an offensive for fully-funded public education with decent working conditions, workers must organise democratic rank-and-file committees outside the control of the union bureaucracy to wage a fight against the Starmer government’s underfunding and marketisation agenda.



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