

Zero for Conduct

The Rebel Education Worker Soapbox



Special Strike Issue No 1

The University and College Union (UCU) announced strikes for 24th, 25th and 30th November which have involved 70,000 workers in 150 universities, in addition to the national demonstration in London on 30th November. The strikes are over pensions, pay, workloads, casualisation and inequalities. UCU members were joined in some universities by striking Unite and Unison members.

The result of the strike ballots initiated by the UCU was announced on October 24th. 81.1 % voted to strike on a turnout of 57.8% for the pay and conditions ballot. For the pension's ballot, support for strike action was higher at 84.9% on a turnout of 60.2%.

After the first two days of strike action union members reported strong turnout at picket lines. The tactical decision of UCU to ballot at a national level, has not only allowed more workers to take strike action but has led to an improved morale compared to last year's action by the union. Morale has also been improved by the action that other unions are taking at the same time, and the wider upswing in industrial action across multiple sectors contributing to a wider feeling of solidarity.

It is the widening of the disputes that is the key to winning. At those universities where multiple unions were able to coordinate their action the effect of industrial action was much more keenly felt by the bosses.

Of course solidarity from university students is also essential. Students themselves are having problems with the rising cost of living. They also face hikes in university rents and massive tuition fees. In addition the cuts in higher education have affected the standard of their education. University managements are trying to blame the disruption of students' education on striking UCU, Unite and Unison members when in fact it is the opening of education to the market that is the real problem. Whilst management is paying itself huge fat cat salaries, lecturers and other staff have experienced what is in reality a pay cut (~25% since 2009), and cuts in pensions (up to 35%).

However, the politics of the leadership of UCU is leading it to make some strategic mistakes. Despite significant grassroots support for the implementation of a marking and assessment boycott (which could be a highly effective tool in the struggle) to start before February, the General Secretary has argued for a delay in any assessment boycott until Spring 2023 (timed to hit final exams). There might be some reasons for this, e.g. to allow time to explain how such a boycott would work and allay fears of breach of contract, but it still seems as if the aim is to avoid it altogether because it will require a new ballot.

A key part of the strategy of the UCU leadership is to appeal to politicians and the media! Really? A Labour Party that has told its MPs not to attend picket lines, a Conservative Party with a viciously anti-working class agenda, and a media rabidly hostile to strike action?



A member at one branch told us *“Despite reaching out to them, we did not even get a reply from our local Labour MPs and councillors. The only MP to respond was a Conservative!”* Another part of this lobbying strategy is to aim for a joint statement with the National Union of Students (NUS). This has long been a body that has been a conveyor belt for careers in the Labour Party and in charity organisations. Over the years it has signally failed to fight against rises in tuition fees and cuts in education. Any solidarity from students must be at an organic, grassroots level.

The General Secretary and national office of the union have justified their strategy on the basis of an online survey of the union. 59.1% supported Grady’s proposal of limited action before February. But this survey was little publicised amongst the UCU membership (only 4,000 members replied). And the questions were clearly worded in such a manner as to elicit the desired response. Similarly at UK-wide Branch Delegate Meeting, many delegates felt that the management of the meeting, especially the chairing by the UCU President Justine Mercer, was conducted such to obtain the answers the national office wanted.

The old, right-wing UCU leadership had a history of ignoring decisions by rank and file members of the union, the new left leadership appears to be circumnavigating them. It appears that the top brass at UCU have been taking lessons from University bosses about “consultation”.

Similarly, the leaderships of other unions have also held back members from action. Recent decisions both the rail unions, the RMT and TSSA, and the Communication Workers Union (CWU), representing BT and postal workers, have cancelled strikes whilst they entered into negotiations. Particularly concerning was the CWU statement that it was signing a joint statement with the Royal Mail bosses for a “de-escalation of tension” and a restoration of “calmness in the workplace”.

For the strikes in universities, or any workplaces to be successful we need the development of grassroots strike committees that build support from other workers, from students and from local communities. By combing the actions of university workers with others - whether postal workers, rail and tube workers, school teachers, nurses, university or school students, renters and those struggling under with the cost of living crisis - coordinated actions can be taken. Politicians, whether in Westminster or the local town hall, are a key part of the problem for workers, looking to them for solutions is a dead end. Only our collective self-organisation can obtain wins!

For more info see: <https://educationworker.wordpress.com/>

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