

WORKING CONDITIONS ARE OUR LEARNING CONDITIONS

University lecturers are fighting to defend their pensions and working conditions

LECTURERS AND other higher education workers are set to strike in a battle over pay, pensions and working conditions.

This follows a national ballot of University and College Union (UCU) members in which 58 branches, including nearby SOAS and Birkbeck, passed the legal threshold for strike action. 21 universities failed to meet the Tories' anti-union threshold of 50% turnout of eligible voters.

FOUR FIGHTS

The dispute is over two separate but related issues. The first is to defend the USS pension scheme. University bosses are trying to make workers pay more for less – despite the union agreeing to changes in 2011 that will leave the typical USS member around £240,000 worse off in retirement.

The second issue is over the 'four fights' – pay, workload, equality and casualisation. Since 2009, real pay has fallen by more than 20 per cent, the gender and ethnic pay gap is increasing, and the proliferation of precarious contracts is putting intolerable pressure on staff.

The context for this assault is the marketisation of the higher education sector, turning education into a commodity in a marketplace of student 'consumers'. This neoliberal project has been underway across Europe for decades, but accelerated in Britain under New Labour and the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government, with the introduction of tuition fees forcing universities to compete for students.

The ballooning salaries of university managers, the proliferation of prestige building projects in order to attract prospective 'customers', are being paid for by scrapping 'unprofitable' courses, attacking employees' pay and conditions, and failing to invest in teaching and research that students need.

SOLIDARITY

This marketisation of higher education

which treats students as cash cows to be milked by rip-off merchants from outsourced cafeterias to residential halls explains why students should support staff – their working conditions are our learning conditions.

However, university bosses and right-wing Student Union leaders are already doing everything they can to undermine solidarity between students and staff. Sabbatical officers at UCL SU condemned potential strikes at the College, despite widespread support for strike action among UCL students and SU members themselves.

Back in February 2020, when UCU members across the country took strike action against the same issues, university managements mounted a vicious attack on student-staff solidarity. It started with campaigns playing on students' status as consumers, pointing out that support for the strike would cause students to miss contact time they were paying for. But it rapidly escalated to punitive measures. Many university managements threatened students with suspension or expulsion from their course if they refused to cross picket lines.

The exploitative and disciplinary character of higher education – upfront payments, crippling debt, and threat of sanctions – mean students need to organise together to fight alongside staff for a free and properly funded education system under student and staff control.

In the absence of meaningful leadership from the National Union of Students (NUS) – not to mention the absence of a national fighting student organisation like the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts which led the movement against the tripling of tuition fees in 2010–11 – it is essential that we begin to organise solidarity now. The recent London-wide UCU solidarity meeting organised by Liberate the University is an important step in this direction, and shows the potential for an assembly of student and staff delegates to coordinate solidarity.

RANK AND FILE

Since 2018, the UCU has undergone a profound shift to the left; the impact of casualisation and extended strike campaigns have won the union thousands of new members. Two years ago, the old leadership of the union was ousted, with independent left candidate Jo Grady elected as General Secretary.

This came in reaction to the previous leadership's sell-out of the pensions strike in 2018 – despite a powerful grassroots opposition, which culminated in the bureaucracy closing down the union's conference in an attempt to prevent criticism of former General Secretary Sally Hunt.

Despite Jo Grady's talk of militancy, the old bureaucracy which led the union since its inception 16 years ago remains largely unchanged and committed to the same methods which have seen lecturers trampled over by successive governments and their agents in university boardrooms.

With members determined to fight, and with strong and organised solidarity from students, there is a real opportunity to channel the anger into a strategy that can win.

In previous disputes, the union organised rapidly escalating action to pile the pressure on. But this time, Jo Grady is proposing only two days of action before Christmas. This won't worry employers who have forced the union to strike four times in four years.

The key task for rank and file UCU members is to take control of the dispute, by fighting to put the dispute under the control of a strike committee composed of recallable delegates from the branches. The strike committee should democratically agree the objectives of the strike, its duration, and retain the right to decide if and when to suspend the action.

Building a militant rank and file movement in the course of action can be the first step to a wider transformation of the union into an instrument for struggle than can fight for a free and properly funded education system under student and staff control.