

- Escalate to all-out action ● No secret negotiations
- Elect strike committees to control the action

DEMOCRATIC CONTROL AND ESCALATION

Tens of thousands of lecturers and other academic staff, organised by the University and College Union (UCU), took strike action at 150 universities on 24 and 25 November with a further day of action planned for 30 November.

The UCU strike involves two inter-related disputes on pay and working conditions as well as savage cuts to the USS pension scheme. At some universities, Unison members joined UCU members on the picket line. University support staff in Unison – many of them among the lowest paid in the sector – are taking industrial action at 19 higher education institutions over substantial real-term pay cuts.

Dispute

In the pay and working conditions dispute, the UCU are demanding a meaningful pay rise to deal with the cost-of-living crisis. Academic staff are facing a 10% cut this year on top of a 25% real term pay cut since 2009. Workloads remain excessive, whilst a third of academic staff are on some form of temporary contract.

In the pension dispute, the UCU are demanding university bosses revoke the cuts implemented in April that reduce the guaranteed retirement income of a typical member by 35%. Data from the USS June financial monitoring report dispelled employers' concerns over a 'deficit' and showed that restoring benefits would leave the scheme with a £0.6bn surplus.

While university staff struggle to make

ends meet, the UK university sector generated a record income of £41.1bn last year. Between them, the 150 vice-chancellors earned an estimated £45 million. The growth of managerialist university governance has seen a proliferation of managerial roles that David Graeber described as 'bullshit

PREPARE TO STEP UP ACTION IN THE NEW YEAR

jobs', while a growing number of part-time academic staff are on fixed-term, hourly paid and zero hours contracts.

The current wave of strikes follows the staggered industrial action that took place during 2021–22. During that dispute, the general secretary Jo Grady sent a document to members in April arguing to delay further action for a year. This crisis of confidence undermined the dispute and marginalised the 20 branches that launched a marking boycott. Encouraged by the leadership's retreat,

employers at several universities withheld 100% of wages for staff participating in the marking boycott, despite them being willing to carry out the majority of their duties. Jo Grady narrowly survived a censure vote at UCU congress over her mismanagement of the dispute.

Lessons

Two key lessons need to be drawn from the 2021–22 dispute. Firstly, escalating strike action beyond symbolic strikes lasting a few days is key to winning this dispute. Without escalating up to indefinite action, universities can reschedule lectures and threaten staff who refuse with docked pay. Secondly, the leadership's promotion of a demobilisation strategy during the 2021–22 dispute underlines the necessity of rank-and-file control of the strikes. UCU activists should build strike committees in every university and elect a recallable national strike committee to keep the dispute on track and guard against capitulation.

Members need to know the next steps following November 30th. Jo Grady has promised to deliver strike action in semester two 'on a scale we haven't done before', but that will require an escalation that has not been seen previously. If university employers do not budge following the November strikes, activists need to put pressure on the leadership to call for indefinite strike action and shut down campuses in the second term. This means building staff-student solidarity on our campuses, planning coordinated action with the other unions, and members taking democratic control of the dispute.

Austerity 2.0: A bankers' budget that robs the poor to protect the rich

JEREMY HUNT has delivered a new austerity budget that offloads £55 billion of tax rises and spending cuts onto the backs of the poor and working class.

The Tories' fourth budget of the year is a plan to protect profits at the expense of workers' incomes. Soaring inflation, bills, prices and taxes target ordinary people, while the vast unearned profits of the big banks, energy companies and corporations are left untouched.

Hunt falsely blamed the 'global situation' for a crisis made in Britain. Liz Truss' disaster budget was only the latest episode following 12 years of austerity and Brexit which have left the economy stagnating, public services on the brink of ruin, and workers' incomes falling at the fastest rate in 70 years.

The government's own forecaster, the OBR, reports living standards will fall by 7% in the next two years. For poorer workers it will be much more. Meanwhile, Hunt has delivered an £18 billion tax cut for banks.

The new government hopes to distance itself from Truss by lowering the threshold for the top rate of income tax from £150,000 to £125,000. But this minuscule increase (£1,243 a year more for those earning £150,000) is dwarfed by the punishing tax hikes on working people.

The so-called 'stealth' tax hikes achieved by freezing the threshold on personal allowances and income tax will drag millions into paying higher rates. The income tax freeze alone will cost the average worker more than £600 a year.

Pensions and benefits will be increased in line with CPI inflation, instead of RPI, currently running at around 14%, and a more accurate indicator of working class living costs. Even this won't compensate for the below-inflation 3% rise this year—and won't come in until April. Millions are already worse off and face a hard winter.

The recession, which the Bank of England promised will be the longest since the 1930s, will see 500,000 jobs wiped out. What does Hunt's budget provide for this? Subjecting 600,000 universal credit claimants to the punitive 'work coach' and sanctions regime to force

them to take low paid, insecure jobs.

The universal £400 payment to help with energy costs will end this winter, at the same time as the limit on the energy price has been raised, costing the average household an extra £900 a year. The windfall tax on energy company profits will increase, bringing in £14 billion—a paltry sum compared to the £15bn profits banked by BP and Shell in the first three months of this year alone.

Where is all this money going? Not to the public sector. Headline announcements of increases to NHS and education budgets are deliberately misleading. The NHS will get £3.3bn, compared to the £10bn health researchers say it needs just to stand still after covid, never mind years of underfunding.

Education budget increases will be swallowed by inflation and pay rises. The announcement that the increase fulfils a Tory promise to restore per-pupil funding to 2010 levels is a stark indicator of how a generation of young people have been sacrificed. Post-16 and special needs education continues its unmanaged decline with no new funding.

Repeating the 2010 playbook, Hunt wants to offload as much responsibility from central government to local authorities, who can now raise council tax by 5% a year, taking the average Band D rates above £2,000 a year. These eye-watering hikes on an already unfair and regressive tax means workers pay more for worse services.

Set against this, the government is now spending more on servicing debt interest than on any public service except the NHS. That money is paid to the banks and financiers who forced up interest rates in the first place. This class war budget is going to collide with national strikes as civil servants, nurses and education workers fight for cost-of-living increases over the winter.

Hunt and Sunak were installed following a market revolt against Liz Truss, who was herself installed after a party revolt against Boris Johnson. The new government refused to hold an election, and knows it has no mandate for a budget whose sole purpose is to placate the financiers holding the country to ransom.

The response on the back benches was

muted. Tax rises and falling living standards won't make the Tories popular come the 2024 election, but the restoration of what the money markets judge to be 'responsible' government has cut the ground from under the opposition.

Keir Starmer's attempt to steal the Tories' clothes by promising that Labour is now the party of "sound money" set the trap, and Hunt's new budget, which postpones most of the cuts until after the 2024 election, has sprung it.

Labour is committed to "balancing the books" and abiding by the Tories' fiscal rules after the next election. Asked what Labour's alternative to tax rises and spending cuts would be, former banker and current shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves was left waffling about making 'fairer choices'. But Labour's shadow health secretary Wes Streeting last month ruled out supporting nurses' demands for a decent pay rise. The Tories have put Labour on the spot—and they have failed the elementary test of class solidarity.

Class war

There's a simple alternative to Tory and Labour austerity. Britain is rich but unequal. This government is protecting the wealth of the rich and making workers pay the price for economic chaos, war and climate change which we didn't cause. Against the organised impoverishment of millions, the labour movement needs to wage a class war to protect living standards and fight for a workers' answer to the crisis based on expropriating the wealth of the rich and creating a sustainable, democratically planned economy in the interests of people not profit.

We can start by building a massive campaign of solidarity with the health, postal, and railworkers' strikes this winter, and organising in the unions for escalating, all-out action as the quickest route to victory. To build a class-wide united front, we should convene mass assemblies in every locality, bringing together workers, renters, and unemployed, to discuss how to respond to the crisis and agree a common plan of action to unite the resistance.

WHO ARE WE?

WORKERS POWER organises for democracy, workers' control and class struggle methods in the labour movement. We are revolutionary communists: against capitalist war, poverty, oppression and climate breakdown, we fight for a socialist economy democratically planned to meet human need.

**FIND OUT MORE
TEXT 'INFO' TO
07478092761**

@WORKERSPOWERL5I

WWW.WORKERSPOWER.UK