

UK University Workers Set for Strike Action

November 14, 2019



Members of the University and College Union (UCU), the national union for academic staff in the UK, are set to strike at 60 universities for eight days between 25 November and 4 December 2019. This follows a highly successful pair of strike ballots among UCU members in higher education: one on pensions, the other on pay, equality, casualisation, and workloads.

The pensions strike continues the long-running dispute over proposed cuts to the United Superannuation Scheme (USS), the main pension plan in what are known as the “pre-92” universities. [1] The cuts in question would see members lose tens of thousands of British pounds in retirement income. In February and March 2018, proposals to change the USS from a “defined benefits” scheme to a “defined contributions” scheme (which would make final pensions depend on investment performance rather than workers’ contributions and effectively spell the end of guaranteed pension benefits) led to the largest strike in UCU’s history. Academic workers joined picket lines at 61 universities for 14 days. Additionally, 26 campuses saw student-led occupations in solidarity with striking staff: almost certainly the largest wave of direct action in the UK student movement since the 2010 protests against the trebling of tuition fees from £3000 to £9000 per year. [2]

The 2018 strike ended in a temporary gain of time for USS members. UCU and the employers’ consortium, Universities UK (UUK), established a Joint Expert Panel (JEP) to assess the assumptions, process, and methodology underlying the USS’ valuation. The JEP’s first report in September 2018 recommended adjusting the valuation, but the employers refused to implement these recommendations. Although they have backed away from closing the defined benefit scheme completely as they intended in 2018, the employers’ proposed changes would still be a major blow to retirement income. A typical USS member would pay approximately £40,000 more to their pension, yet receive almost £200,000 less in retirement. This would leave them £240,000 worse off in total.

As for the pay dispute, this affects both the “pre-92” and “post-92” universities. As such, staff at 43 of the 60 universities due to see industrial action will be striking over both pay and pensions. In real terms, pay in higher education has dropped by 17% since 2009. By UCU’s own estimates, 46% of universities use zero-hour contracts for teaching and 68% of research staff are precariously employed on fixed-term contracts. On average, black academic staff are paid 14% less than their white colleagues and the gender pay gap in universities is 13.7%, which is significantly above the national average.

In the UK, a formidable web of anti-union laws introduced since the Thatcher era strangles our ability to defend our class interests via industrial action. These anti-union laws include the prohibition on all secondary action (e.g. striking in solidarity with workers in a different union) under the Employment Act 1990 and the 50% turnout threshold for industrial action ballots under the Trade Union Act 2016. The fact that UCU branches at so many different universities met the

threshold is therefore a major achievement in itself. Equally praiseworthy is the fact that 79% of UCU members who voted in the pensions ballot and 74% of those who voted in the pay ballot were in favour of strike action.

These results are an early positive sign for UCU's new leadership under General Secretary Dr Jo Grady. This is especially true in light of how, last academic year (before Grady's election to General Secretary), two UCU national industrial action ballots over pay in higher education failed to satisfy the 50% turnout requirement.

In this article, I will analyse the significance of the upcoming strike in three related contexts: (1) building the rank and file in UCU, (2) fighting against the marketisation of education, and (3) uniting the student and labour movements.

1. Building the Rank and File in UCU

Earlier this year, Grady's predecessor Sally Hunt stepped down as General Secretary for health reasons. Hunt's handling of the 2018 USS strike loomed over the ensuing election. Hunt ended the 2018 strike by putting a deal to UCU members that offered little in the way of concrete guarantees, while many members seemed to be open to a modified deal with clearer and more reliable assurances (a position identified on social media with the hashtag #ReviseAndResubmit). Ultimately, a 64% majority accepted the deal, but many activists were outraged at how Hunt conducted herself, using her monopoly over the union's internal communications to mislead the membership - and selling out the strike. [3]

More troubling developments came with UCU Congress 2018, where Hunt dramatically shut down the Congress proceedings three times in response to motions critical of her leadership. These included a motion of censure and a motion of no confidence. Senior officials walked out of the Congress with Hunt each time the delegates voted to hear the motions in question, despite the elected Congress Business Committee repeatedly emphasising that these motions had been deemed legitimate. In an especially farcical turn of events, Hunt and other UCU officials (represented by a chapel of Unite the Union) claimed that hearing the motions would be a breach of their employment rights as UCU staffers.

The 2018 USS Strike and UCU Congress fed a grassroots upsurge. Members formed new activist networks committed to making UCU more militant and democratic. As a co-founder of USS Briefs, a popular series of online papers by university staff and students on the USS strike and other issues in higher education, Grady was a prominent figure in this grassroots upsurge and stood in the 2018 General Secretary election as an independent left-wing candidate. In a landslide victory, she picked up 48.7% of the vote in the first round and then 64% in the second round.

Grady's victory is extremely significant because it strongly suggests an eagerness among UCU members for a bolder and more accountable union. This is especially true in light of how Grady comfortably defeated both Matt Waddup, the candidate for Independent Broad Left (the then-incumbent right-wing faction in the union), and Jo McNeill, the candidate for UCU Left (the established left-wing faction, in which the Socialist Workers Party plays a prominent role). In other words, Grady successfully positioned herself as a left-wing, rank and file candidate to whom UCU's dramatically expanded membership could turn for meaningful change.

Nevertheless, while Grady was a rank and file candidate insofar as she was a worker-activist and not a bureaucrat, and was readily identified with the "new left" of the union that emerged from the events of 2018, UCU does not yet have a properly constituted rank and file caucus where UCU activists in favour of union democracy and a more combative ethos organise regularly. Rather, the

“new left” of the union exists in various overlapping networks, such as Branch Solidarity Network and UCU Rank and File, that mainly exist online. To be sure, there are some promising in-person meetings, such as the “UCU Transformed” events co-hosted by UCU London Region, but these are infrequent and there is still no national hub with democratic structures in which all rank and file activists organise. In short, we have an identifiable layer of rank and file militants in the membership who communicate and coordinate with each other informally, but very little infrastructure for making and executing collective decisions.

It is therefore important to use the upcoming strike to renew efforts to build a viable rank and file caucus in UCU. In this respect, the experience of the union democracy movement in the US is instructive. The 1997 United Parcel Service (UPS) strike by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), which lasted 16 days, cost UPS hundreds of millions in US dollars, and won most of the union’s demands, came off the back of a long campaign by Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) to reform the IBT into a union free of corruption and accountable to its membership. The Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) was instrumental in transforming their union into a militant, member-led body. One sees the long-term benefits of this transformation in the CTU’s recent victory in its major strike over staffing demands.

However laudable Grady’s performance as General Secretary has been so far, putting reliable left-wingers into elected positions of leadership is not enough. As we see from the American examples, internal struggles for union democracy have a direct and positive impact upon external struggles against the bosses. Moreover, while UCU’s formal leadership now includes multiple figures from the “new left” of the union, the larger bureaucratic machinery that frustrated militant organisers during the Hunt years is still very much in place. As such, there is always a risk that Grady will become isolated at the top of the union from the very base that brought her into power and face stalwart resistance from unelected UCU staffers.

Accordingly, a democratic organisation that meets regularly in person and campaigns to transform UCU on a structural and cultural level is much needed, along with demands for transparent bargaining practices (e.g. live-streamed negotiations), for democratic accountability, and for all union officials to take a salary equivalent to the average wage of the workers they represent.

2. The Marketisation of Education

Higher education is presented solely in terms of its private benefit to the individual, sometimes explicitly framed as a financial asset in which one “invests” (the “return” on this investment being higher earnings after graduation). [4] The shift towards conceptualising the higher education sector as a market and higher education as a commodity sold to student “consumers” has occurred in multiple phases over the past 30 years, including the Blair Government’s introduction of tuition fees of up to £1000 per year across the entire UK in 1998, the trebling of tuition fees to £3000 per year in 2004 under New Labour, their further trebling to £9000 per year in 2010-12 under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition (which sparked the 2010 student movement), and the introduction of the metrics known as the “Excellence Frameworks.” [5] These frameworks ostensibly measure quality of research and quality of teaching based on factors like the number of academic papers submitted for publication within each “cycle” and the student employment after graduation. This metricisation reinforces the idea that institutions are competing with each other to survive and provides a means of ranking institutions.

This “bigger picture” in higher education is the key backdrop for the upcoming strikes. The attacks on education workers’ pensions, pay, and conditions, and the increasing precarity of employment in the education sector, stem from marketisation. Accordingly, UCU’s message should be that pensions and pay are under threat, workloads are untenable, and employment is insecure because of higher

education's structural transformation.

3. **Uniting the Student and Labour Movements**

The overarching issue of marketisation directly flows into the last key context: bringing together the struggles of students and workers. The main reason the 2018 USS strike sparked such a major upsurge in student activism is that students were able to see their interests as aligned with those of academic staff over teaching conditions as well as marketisation as the source of extortionate rents, rising fees, and overcrowded campuses. Despite the employers' hopes that students would feel cheated of the tuition for which they were incurring fees and therefore oppose the strikes, students saw themselves and the striking education workers as united in struggle against a common foe.

Highly visible activism on specific campuses has occurred in the context of decline of the UK student movement overall since the high-water mark of the 2010 protests. If the 2018 USS strike's brief but dramatic rejuvenation of cross-campus student activism is anything to go by, then UCU's upcoming industrial action could easily set off a new wave of student-led direct action on campus and renew efforts to organise the student movement into a viable force on the national stage. [6]

The National Union of Students (NUS) has made a joint statement with UCU in mutual support. [7] Among other things, the statement calls on NUS members to "participate in local demonstrative solidarity action, both during the disputes and the likely strikes, in support of UCU members." NUS could also commit to more concrete measures of support, for example, NUS could produce and distribute its own materials (e.g. leaflets, posters) on why and how to support the strikes, send its full-time officers on a speaker tour in support of UCU, and use its resources to support students threatened with victimisation for taking direct action in solidarity with UCU. To NUS' credit, it has taken steps in the right direction by releasing a video statement with UCU to explain the strike's importance and encourage students to use their voice to support striking staff. More activist strategies, like staging occupations, banner-drops, and eye-catching demonstrations of support for UCU, and lobbying Vice-Chancellors to use their voice in the employers' consortium to press for conceding to UCU's demands, contrast with the joint statement's advice to students to "write to their institution head to raise concerns about the impact such disputes will have on their learning".

UCU and its student supporters have an opportunity to connect the upcoming strikes with wider struggles. The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) has also had a successful national strike ballot, achieving an astonishing 97.1% vote in favour of strike action. However, the High Court of England and Wales has just granted an injunction restraining them from striking, finding that CWU had contravened trade union legislation by "interfering" in the ballot process. Troublingly for labour activists, this supposed "interference" includes encouraging members to vote at work. [8] If CWU members overcome this legal setback and have overlapping strike days with UCU, then it raises the possibility of joint rallies and other displays of cross-sector workers' solidarity. Similarly, one of UCU's set strike day will coincide with the next Global Climate Strike on 29 November. This provides a chance to make connections between organised labour and the environmentalist movement, and to point to the possibility of a worker-led just transition, with public ownership of energy, transport, and finance, and sustainable, high-paid, unionised work. With the General Election scheduled for 12 December this year, the election campaign period gives striking UCU members an opening for placing education-related issues in the national spotlight.

UCU is set to go on strike after surmounting the UK's anti-union laws: tremendously positive news and a promising indication of the direction in which the union is heading under Grady's leadership. Still, UCU members have much to do in pushing for union democracy and militancy via a rank and file strategy, linking our strike demands to the larger fight over the very purpose of education itself, and connecting UCU's struggles with those of students and other workers, both on and beyond

campus.

[1] The terminology of “pre-92” and “post-92” refers to the reforms under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. These reforms gave official university status to academic institutions previously known as polytechnics or central institutions, which traditionally focused on vocational education for professional work and emphasised teaching over research. In other words, a “pre-92” university is an institution that already had university status when the 1992 reforms took place and a “post-92” university is an institution that gained university status during or after the 1992 reforms.

[2] For my own discussion of this wave of direct action, which analyses the relationship between the 2010 and the 2018 campus occupations, see [here](#).

[3] For my commentary on these events at the time, see [here](#).

[4] For an in-depth analysis of these processes in UK higher education, see: Andrew McGettigan, *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education* (Pluto Press 2013).

[5] The devolved governments in Scotland and Wales later abolished tuition fees and reintroduced student grants respectively.

[6] The Student Left Network, of which I am a member, emerged in part from the surge in student-staff solidarity activism during 2018 USS strike.

[7] The NUS is a confederation of approximately 600 students’ unions in the UK, representing about 7 million students in total. Despite its name, it is not strictly a union and tends to behave more like a non-governmental organisation (NGO).

[8] At the time of writing this article, the full High Court judgment text is not yet publicly available, so I cannot confirm the exact legal basis of the decision.