

Striking college lecturers protest outside of Scottish parliament

By Stephen Alexander
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Lecturers held a rally Thursday outside Scotland's devolved Parliament in Edinburgh as part of the first of 12 nationwide one-day strikes planned over the next three months.

The members of the Education Institute for Scotland (EIS), the country's largest teaching union, are striking because the employers, Colleges Scotland, have failed to implement a pay deal agreed in March 2016. This included a 9 percent pay rise for lecturers over the next two years and a "harmonised" payment structure standardising pay grades across Scotland's recently merged colleges.

Colleges Scotland is seeking to force through a reduction in holidays and a four-hour increase in class contact time per week, in return for the implementation of the agreement.

The remarks of the main speaker at the rally, John Kelly, president of the EIS's Further Education Lecturer's Association, aimed to corral the protest behind minimal appeals to the Scottish National Party (SNP) government and Members of the Scottish Parliament, to force Colleges Scotland to "honour the deal."

In a Facebook video message posted just prior to the strike, which formed the backbone of his speech at the rally, Kelly sought to present the SNP as a defender of education and labour rights:

"The Scottish government has a clear policy of national bargaining. Our employers are seeking to undermine that. The Scottish government has a clear strategic objective of delivering high quality education in Further Education. Our employers are seeking to undermine that."

He concluded by calling on lecturers to write to the SNP's Minister for Further Education, Shirley-Anne Somerville. "If she intervenes in this dispute," he

remarked, "I am confident that the deal will be honoured."

In fact, the SNP has targeted colleges with some of its worst austerity cuts, slashing hundreds of millions of pounds from the further education budget. In recent years, staffing levels have been reduced by nearly 10 percent and 152,000 college places wiped out as part of the merger of 37 colleges into just 20.

The bankrupt and prostrate character of the trade unions is the main reason why the EIS was barely able to mobilise 250 of its 4,500-strong membership among further education lecturers. Trade union functionaries were overwhelmingly represented at the rally and it was striking that barely any students were present.

Despite almost a decade of swingeing education cuts, the EIS resisted any national action up until last year, when a few one-day stoppages took place. At no point has it mobilised its 60,000-strong membership at other levels of education, who face identical conditions.

The Unison trade union has already wound up the struggle of college support staff, in return for a deal comprising a real-terms pay cut.

Many of the lecturers who spoke to WSWs reporters raised concerns that both working conditions and education standards would continue to deteriorate, even if the deal was agreed.

Jo, who lectures at Edinburgh College, said, "It's not just about the amount of time you spend in front of a class, it's also about the amount of prep as well as the time for marking students. The student of tomorrow will be entitled to a worse deal than the student of yesterday. And it's just not fair on our students. They need more of our time and support, especially since they've cut other services at colleges."

He criticised government figures showing an improvement in the quality of college education,

saying, “We all know it’s fake.” “If you actually ask anybody who goes in the classroom and works with these students,” he continued, “they’ll tell you things are diabolical.”

Jo indicated that lecturers have had to take on responsibility for a much broader deterioration of social conditions.

“The standard of students we’re getting into the college is dropping, which indicates a problem with high schools,” he said. “We’re working under conditions in which the students we’re seeing have more and more complex needs—they might be dyslexic, they might have mental health issues, they are often put on courses which are unsuitable for them.

“I’ve been to classrooms with up to five, six, seven, 12 too many students. Lecturers are having to deal with people who aren’t happy to be there, who aren’t in the right place, or who don’t have the right support.”

Denouncing the strategy of the government and management to tailor college education more closely to corporate interests, Jo said, “We work in a situation where management are always talking about bringing in corporate money and investment from elsewhere. ... We need to realise first and foremost that this is not a business, it is education.”

Neil, a lecturer at a Glasgow college, also raised concerns over downwardly spiralling education standards. “I think standards have definitely declined and this is just another manifestation of it. It’s about trying to give people certificates on the cheap,” he remarked.

In response to the international socialist perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), Neil said, “If you’re going to challenge a global system there has to be a global response.” He expressed concerns that the global organisation of the working class would be extremely difficult with the “worrying shift to the right” in world politics and “the rise of protectionism, nationalism and the attacks on immigrants.”

He adamantly rejected, however, the idea peddled in the media that there is a deep-rooted support in the working class for right-wing politics. “Ironically, the challenge to globalisation,” he remarked, “could actually be coming from within the global elite itself.”

Socialist Equality Party members and supporters posed the necessity for lecturers to establish their own

rank-and-file committees independent of the trade union bureaucracy as the basis to fight for the broadest possible mobilisation of workers throughout the education sector in the UK and internationally.

The SEP team sought to raise political and historical issues beyond the narrow parameters of struggle set by the education unions. They explained that lecturers face a battle against not only college management, but against the unions, and the governments of Holyrood and Westminster. At a heart of the struggle to defend education is the struggle against capitalism, which subordinates the interests of the working class, the vast majority, to the profit interests of an obscenely wealthy financial oligarchy. An effective struggle to defend education can only be taken forward on the basis of a socialist strategy.

This perspective was received positively by lecturers, as was the insistence that the struggle to defend education and general social conditions must be linked with a struggle against imperialist war.

One lecturer said of the danger of a third world war, “I think it’s getting ridiculous. We’re all just people. It doesn’t matter where you’re from. I think a lot of politicians are out of touch with what’s happening and what people are really feeling.”

The same lecturer denounced the militarist campaign mounted by all factions of the British ruling class, in conjunction with the media, to denounce Jeremy Corbyn, the nominally left Labour Party leader, for merely suggesting that he would seek to avoid the use of nuclear weapons if he became prime minister:

“No one really agrees what they’re saying about this idea that you can’t be a good leader if you won’t press the button [launching nuclear weapons]. So does that mean if you’re willing to press a button it makes you a good leader? Really? What is it they’re trying to achieve here—total annihilation!”

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