

UK lecturers stage second day of national strikes

By Robert Stevens
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Lecturers around the UK struck for the second day of a national strike yesterday, bringing many campuses to a standstill.

They are fighting attacks on their pensions being imposed by the employers' body, Universities UK. Under their proposals, lecturers' pensions covered by the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) will be cut by around 40 percent, with the average lecturer losing around £10,000 a year.

The two-day stoppage is part of a scheduled 14 days of action involving 40,000 lecturers across 57 universities. It is the biggest strike held at universities in British history and the biggest overall in the UK since the 2016 junior doctors strike.

Lecturers turned out in force on picket lines and held rallies on campuses in the UK's main towns and cities. Many students held protests and support rallies. The strikes and protests are part of a resurgent struggle by the working class internationally.

In contrast to the determined and militant stand by lecturers and students, the main activity of the University and College Union (UCU)—with the backing of Labour Party leaders Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell—is to insist that the strikes give way as soon as possible to resumed negotiations.

Throughout the strike, the UCU's website has had a graphic emblazoned at the top of its home page: "It's not too late! Universities UK can still commit to meaningful negotiations over pensions and *end the strike action*" (emphasis in original).

On Thursday, Corbyn released a video on his Twitter account in which he said, "It's been great to see support from students for striking staff but for everyone's sake we need to find a solution that avoids further disruption."

He added, "So I join staff and students in calling for

the employers to commit now to meaningful negotiations, through ACAS [Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service Council] if necessary, to resolve this dispute."

ACAS has overseen the ending of countless strikes on the employers' terms and is led today by former Trades Union Congress (TUC) leader Sir Brendan Barber, who was knighted in 2013.

As the strike began, McDonnell spoke at a rally at Goldsmith's university in London—one of the 16 institutions in the capital hit by the strike—and offered the same palliatives as Corbyn. In a tweet, McDonnell called "on employers to enter meaningful negotiations to resolve this dispute."

On Friday, the board of Universities UK (UU) met in London for their quarterly meeting, at which the current strike was to be discussed. UCU General Secretary Sally Hunt said she agreed with Conservative government universities minister Sam Gyimah's call for "talks without preconditions."

"We hope the sensible voices at this morning's [UUK] strike summit will give their negotiators a clear mandate to go back to the table and get this mess sorted out," she said. "If they want to talk to us without preconditions, as the universities minister has suggested, then let's do it today."

In an article published Friday in the Conservative-supporting *Daily Telegraph*, headlined, "Strike action on this scale has never been seen before on British university campuses," Hunt warned that the strike was set to expand and "By Monday 5 March if nothing has been resolved the action will affect 64 institutions and well over 1 million students."

For the union bureaucracy, avoiding such an outcome was critical, with the article's next sentence reading, "What we need now is for both sides to get round the

table for talks.”

The UCU did everything possible to avoid the strike taking place, with Hunt writing, “We have been clear from the start of this dispute that we want things resolved around the negotiating table. We announced the strike dates well in advance of our legal duty to allow time for negotiations, yet UUK refused to meet with us.”

Gyimah, cited favourably by Hunt, represents the same government committed to enforcing mass austerity as Liz Truss, the chief secretary to the Treasury, who the previous day tweeted in support of lecturers who crossed picket lines saying, “Some excellent lecturers are going in to work today. I salute you.”

In the face of government-backed intimidation, students protested at several universities to spread support for the lecturers. On Friday, academics and students turned up to protest Gyimah as he was speaking at an event at Manchester’s Metropolitan University.

At the University of Sussex campus Thursday, a group of students were attacked when they entered a lecture hall to call on students to join fellow students in support of their tutors. According to the Sussex Supports the Strike group, one of the demonstrators was “violently tackled into a wooden table.” Video footage confirms that a student in the lecture theatre had a physical altercation with peaceful protesters.

A tweet from the group read, “University officials stood by and watched this assault that was only ended by the quick intervention of other marchers.

“This university has rightly emphasised that our protests will be peaceful, but it seems that this message has not been sent to the opposition. And students are only protected from violence when they are on the same side as management.”

Also Thursday, students sat on the road to prevent buses from entering Sussex campus after Brighton & Hove Buses, which had previously promised not to come on campus, sent buses through.

The BBC reported yesterday that the chief executive of the lecturers’ pension scheme received a 17 percent pay rise worth an extra £82,000 this year. Bill Galvin’s pay package rose from £484,000 to £566,000, said a spokeswoman for the USS. Running costs for the university pension scheme were £125 million per

year—including two staff earning over £1 million. More than 100 of its staff earn more than £100,000.

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