

UK lecturers speak in support of West Virginia teachers

By our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to striking UK lecturers and other university staff during the first two days of this week's four-day strike. This is the third successive week of strikes in opposition to attacks on their pension rights. Socialist Equality Party members distributed to strikers on picket lines copies of the statement, "UK lecturers dispute: Lessons from the West Virginia teachers strike."

Molly is from the United States and in her third year as a lecturer in American Studies at the University of Manchester. She told reporters, "The strikes by UK lecturers and West Virginia teachers are linked. In the US teachers are forced to wear wrist monitors all the time. They have to work out in the gym every day, because how much they get paid in health insurance is dependent on how much they work out.

"It's the same offloading of unpaid labour onto us and teachers in the US."

Universities UK is proposing that lecturers in the Universities Superannuation Scheme be moved to a scheme in which pension pay-outs are dependent on stock market investments.

"They want us to manage our own pension funds, and by the time I'm 70 there might not be anything left, with the stock market collapsing. We don't do these public-sector jobs for the money. Teachers in West Virginia are one of the lowest paid; they could leave but they stay because they care," she said.

Molly wanted to see more workers involved in the fight against the attack on pensions and marketisation of higher education, saying, "It would be good to broaden the strikes."

Lucy is a lecturer at Leeds University: "The principal reason for the strike is pensions. They say they are 'reforming' them, but that means a substantial cut. With the 'modeller' that they've got online, mine

would be £18,000 a year, and it will go down to £11,000 a year. It's a transformative change, a £7,000 a year dip. That's the initial thing, but it connects to all sorts of other problems with the university.

"There is a lot of casualisation. There are people working on short-term contracts, much more so than there were in earlier times. Many people don't get into their first permanent job until they are in their 30s. And you're lucky if you get there even in your 30s. As a result you don't start saving for a pension until quite a lot later, so there's even more risk associated with the pension changes from that perspective.

"That's one of the reasons that I'm here, for myself, but also for junior colleagues who are coming in and joining the profession.

"We're doing this because it's a really important fight. If we lose this, there are lots of other pensions in the public sector all around the country that are going to be next—teachers, NHS workers and so on. I think we need to win this one, it's the only way.

"I'm intrigued as to what the Universities UK think they are doing. I assume they are just hanging about, not doing much, hoping we'll crack. But the point is, we are not daft. We think critically about the world and we know what's going on. We understand that they are trying to cut our pensions and there's no good reason for it.

"I am married to a teacher, who started really late in life, but who will probably get a better pension than me. This is even though I've been in my pension scheme for 14 years, because they are degrading it to such an extent. Unless of course they go after his pension as well. If they do, it will mean that we are forced to ask for benefits in our retirement.

"We have both got a very high level of education, we've both got professional jobs, and that should not

be the case... We are on double the average income, and yet we are going to be forced to ask for help.

“Our salaries are not in line with the private sector. If I was an environmental consultant, I could be getting double what I’m earning now. That’s part of the trade-off. I love my job. I love working in this institution, but there is a balance there. My future is what, to have a reasonable income until I retire and then penury? It doesn’t look particularly attractive, does it?”

Robbie, a lecturer at the University of Glasgow, said he had learned of the West Virginia teachers strike via the leaflet the SEP members were circulating.

After reading the leaflet, he said, “All I can say from a very snowy Glasgow is that we wish you [the West Virginia teachers] all the luck and support in your struggle.

“I came into the dispute rather gloomily. Past struggles have ended anticlimactically, but there seems to be a bit of muscle this time. People in academia seem galvanized. And it seems like we’re on the cusp of winning.”

Responding to calls by the Socialist Equality Party for the mobilization of broader sections of the working class, Robbie remarked, “This dispute could be the spark that lights the touch paper for public sector workers. It seems to me that this is an attack on life as a pensioner, life in retirement. This Tory government seems to want to condemn pensioners to a life in poverty. It’s not just in academia, but in every area of the public sector.”

Ian, a political geography lecturer, said, “The strike has been a lightning rod for a variety of issues within education. For me, personally, it’s about the wider marketisation of education and the turning of education into just another commodity. It’s about protecting education as a public service. It’s about what I call ‘education as liberation’.

“If you mean to change academia such that only the wealthy can afford to work here and only the wealthy can afford to study here, then you no longer have an effective challenge to the status quo and hegemonic common sense. I’m out here to defend education much more broadly than my own pension.”

Ian said he agreed on the necessity of an international and socialist perspective and mobilisation of the working class against a mounting war danger: “I think

an internationalist perspective is very important because the military-industrial complex isn’t bound by any borders, and so any challenge to it must come from across national borders. That’s why the defence of education and the role of lecturers is very important. It’s to make people aware of the military-industrial complex and the danger of war. Its tentacles spread far and wide, it’s sucking the blood and money out of many communities. It’s a lethal force that must be challenged. And that’s what I try to do in my lectures.”

The discussion turned to the issue of the Russian Revolution as a strategic experience in the re-emerging struggles of the working class. Ian said, “An important lesson of the revolution is really that the struggle we face ahead is a struggle that cannot simply be waged through traditional parliamentary forms of democracy. It requires people getting together in their communities and it requires action on the street.

“As the state increasingly becomes a garrison state rather than a welfare state, we cannot simply keep looking toward the state to defend our interests.”

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