

The role of the UCU Left in the effort to shut down the UK lecturers strike

By Robert Stevens
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Friday was the last of 14 days of strike action by UK lecturers and other academic workers, fighting against the destruction of their pension rights.

The last four weeks of a bitter dispute only continued because on Tuesday thousands of strikers voted overwhelmingly in impromptu meetings against a sell-out deal engineered Monday evening between the University and College Union (UCU) and the employers' body, Universities UK (UUK).

The union and management had worked out the precise steps for ending the strike. But as union delegates from 65 higher education institutions met in the London HQ to vote on the agreement, hundreds of angry lecturers surrounded the building. Speaking to the angry strikers outside the HQ, UCU leader Sally Hunt was constantly heckled, with one worker pointing at her stating, "You are now objectively on the side of the employers!" See video here .

Having been thwarted in its plans, the UCU will use the next weeks to complete its betrayal. It immediately appealed to UUK for "urgent talks," "to try and find a way to get this dispute resolved." No more strikes are planned until a further 14 days, sometime in May during the exam period.

The UCU is not an organisation that represents its members, but—as the striker in London correctly stated—one that fights in the interest of the employers. It will continue to plot behind the scenes to finalise a "compromise" that cleaves as close as possible to the demands of management.

The only action the UCU has sanctioned in the next period is two-day strikes over pay at just 12 further education colleges, out of 319 colleges nationally. Eleven of these colleges are based in London, with a token college being called out in the Midlands. They will not even strike on the same day.

Apart from two days of action by the college staff at the

beginning of the lecturers' dispute, the UCU ensured that the lecturers and college workers were never on strike at the same time—under conditions in which a powerful offensive by both, with the enthusiastic support of students, would be able to close down the entire higher education (HE) and further education (FE) sectors.

The UCU has organised an unbroken record of betrayals over the last decade in the face of a government and employers onslaught against jobs, wages, pension and working conditions.

A critical role in this has been played by the UCU Left, which describes itself "as a diverse group of socialists and left-wingers in UCU. Our supporters include members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the Labour Party, other left groups..."

In the UCU's first elections after the union's 2006 formation, the UCU Left won 30 of the 68 seats on its national executive committee (NEC). One of their candidates, Sasha Callaghan, won the vice-presidency of the union, later becoming its president. The UCU Left later won a majority on the NEC, although the UCU was still headed by Sally Hunt—who was supported by the Independent Broad Left faction organised by Labourites and members of the Stalinist Communist Party.

From the beginning, the UCU Left pledged to work with the right wing within the UCU leadership. SWP member and UCU NEC member Mark Campbell said, as the UCU Left won its 30 seats, "We agree with Sally Hunt that this is a time for unity, but that has to be based on fighting to defend our members' terms and conditions, which has to come from the centre and move towards the membership."

No such fight "from the centre" was mounted.

In 2011, the UCU was among the more than 20 unions that organised a rout of the struggle to defend public sector pensions. After 2 million workers supported a strike, in the first major struggle against the incoming

Conservative Cameron government, the unions ensured that the movement was called off.

The UCU Left lost its majority in the 2012 UCU elections, while still retaining 30 members on the NEC, while Hunt's faction had 39. A February 2012 statement was released by the UCU Left, at a time when Hunt was organising a witch-hunt against what she claimed was "a union within a union." It pledged, "We should emphasise ... that belonging to one or other grouping on the NEC does not prevent NEC members working together where we can reach common ground. UCU Left NEC members and UCU Independent Broad Left members, and others, have worked together on many NEC committees and working groups."

The right wing had nothing to fear, it said, since "In the UCU Left, we seek unity ... and privilege that unity over the exercise of bloc votes."

SWP member Liz Lawrence held the position of UCU National President from 2014-2016. In the latest elections to the NEC earlier this month, the UCU Left won 15 seats in the HE and FE sections, and its candidate Nita Sanghera won the vice president's position.

In the current dispute, the UCU Left has played a treacherous role, with SWP member Carlo Morelli sitting on the UCU's USS negotiation committee, involved in the talks with the UUK. After the UCU/UUK agreement was announced, a UCU Left website posting claimed it was not a sell-out: "Our negotiators had a gun pointed at their heads. A gun of 'accept this or get DC [the inferior Defined Contribution pension system]'. A compromise was born. It doesn't necessarily mean negotiators are selling out. This compromise is what happens when you work within the projected deficit and face the threat of 100% DC."

UCU members took to social media to denounce the agreement, with a number pledging to leave the union if the sell-out deal was enforced. Many retweeted the hashtag #NoCapitulation.

The following comments expressed the sentiment among lecturers:

"I've never joined a union until now suspicions of the way the people at the top arrange deals that do not benefit the workers. I joined this time. Feel like I was proven right. How do I cancel my membership? ... If the strike is called off today I do not want to be associated with the UCU. I can still fight and protest and I will!"

Another wrote: "Totally sold down the river. If this goes forward, I'll be withdrawing my membership forthwith."

One lecturer described the sell-out deal as "Sally Hunt's 'let them eat cake moment'", with another adding, "If you [the UCU] agree to this deal, expect a huge number of people resigning from the union in protest."

Opposed to this incipient rebellion, and fearful that the struggle over pensions would break free of the stranglehold of the UCU, the UCU Left set out to maintain the union's control at all costs while posing as critics of the deal and friends of UCU members.

The SWP declared that "rank and file democracy, participation and militancy is hugely welcome" because, "It is the way to renew our unions."

"Now the union leadership can be pressured to really wage a fight over pensions," it insisted.

In opposition to the UCU Left and all the apologists for the unions, the Socialist Equality Party has fought for the building of independent rank-and-file committees of education workers and students, *in opposition* to the UCU, the NUS, the TUC, the Labour Party and their political apologists. Such committees will create the framework for mobilizing the entire working class to defend jobs, wages, conditions and the right to a decent pension, as part of the fight for a socialist reorganization of economic life.

The Socialist Equality Party is holding an online and call-in forum for lecturers and education workers on Tuesday, March 27 at 7.30 p.m. It will discuss how to take the struggle out of the hands of the UCU by establishing rank-and-file committees based on a socialist programme and organising a turn to workers throughout the education sector in Britain and internationally who face the same attacks.

To participate in the meeting, click here when the meeting begins, or call +44 330 221 0088 and enter access code 900-111-333. If using your phone from the UK, the number will be billed at the national call rate.

To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>