

UK higher education and university staff oppose union sellout ahead of ballot result

By Thomas Scripps
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Lecturers and other further education staff are resisting the attempt by the University and College Union (UCU) to betray their strike against massive cuts to pensions planned by the Universities UK (UUK) employers.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), its Education FightBack initiative and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) call for a decisive rejection of the UUK/UCU deal in the ballot due to close at 2pm Friday.

The strike began after UUK proposed to end the defined benefits within the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS), as a precursor to ending a national pension scheme altogether. Academics joining the USS now stand to lose more than £200,000 (US \$283,074) in deferred wages from their retirement income. Many others would lose tens of thousands of pounds.

In opposition, 40,000 UCU members have taken 14 days of strike action since February 22—in the largest ever strike in Higher Education (HE) in British history.

Following a rebellion by strikers on March 12-13, which defeated the UCU's first attempt to sell out the dispute, the union entered into a new round of negotiations with the employers. They concocted a rotten deal, which the union is trying to force through by an online ballot of lecturers.

The new deal offers nothing to employees. According to the document released, a joint panel will be set up to assess the disputed financial valuation of the pension scheme, whose findings USS trustees are under no obligation to accept!

The current pension scheme is to be maintained only until April 2019, when a new scheme will be decided that meets “the affordability challenges for all parties.” There is no commitment that staff will not lose out under these new arrangements.

The UCU's only concern is to demobilise a powerful offensive by higher education workers that threatens to break from its control. To this end, it is facilitating an assault by UUK on working conditions throughout HE. The wording of the proposal itself was not even the product of a

formal negotiation process, but dictated to UCU by the employers. The UCU's sole purpose is to sell the deal, by hook or by crook, to its membership.

The move to put management's offer to a ballot was voted for 10-8 by UCU's Higher Education Committee (HEC) on March 28, even though 32 of 35 branches called for its rejection. At a branch delegates meeting, held prior to the HEC, the bureaucracy ensured that no vote was held on whether to send the proposal to ballot. This was so as not to jeopardize their pre-arranged decision to push the deal to members.

Expecting opposition, UCU General Secretary Sally Hunt posted a Q&A recommending acceptance of the deal along with the threat that there would not be a better offer. This included the following:

“[G]iven that no one knows what the independent panel will find my assessment is that it is extremely unlikely that the university employer will go beyond this commitment and agree to a no detriment clause...not least because the current arrangement provides that any future contribution increases are shared between the employers and members.”

In a blatant and ant-democratic attempt to railroad strikers into accepting, as the online ballot opened, Hunt said, “I do not think we should risk what we have achieved to chase a ‘no detriment’ [to lecturer's pensions] clause.

“I believe instead that we should bank the substantial concessions we have achieved from the employers.”

In fact, there are no concessions, and the UCU's attempted sellout has met with strong resistance from many members who do not buy the bureaucracy's propaganda. Under these conditions, a majority of UCU branches across the country have already voted in well-attended meetings to recommend a “No” vote to their members. Of the 21 branches to announce a position following the opening of the ballot, 19 have voted “No”. These include branches at the universities of Kent and Liverpool, University College London and Salford. A petition “Reject the UUK deal—We need to fight now” is gaining widespread support.

Lecturers have expressed their opposition by utilizing

various hashtags on Twitter, including “#RejectUUKDeal”, “#VoteNO”, “#NoCapitulation” and “#NoDetriment”

One striker tweeted, “Sally Hunt’s made the ballot a matter of trust in her judgement. As @UCU GS [General Secretary] for 12 years she presided over the closing of final pension scheme (20% pension loss) and 20% wage decline. So it would be really crazy not to trust her, wouldn’t it?”

Another said, “I find Sally Hunt’s email an absolute shame. For her to use a ‘Q&A’ email to try and bias people’s vote at this point is dishonest. I not only don’t have confidence in UUK but I now have little confidence in @UCU national leadership.”

Another warned, “...if you vote yes in the ballot, you’re getting the 12th of March crap deal we’ve all loudly rejected with #NoCapitulation.”

Another said, “union leaders love to grasp defeat from jaws of victory #voteno.”

In order for workers to defeat the plans being hatched by UUK/UCU, criticism of the union bureaucracy must be extended to a conscious political break with this tool of management. The Socialist Equality Party and IYSSE call on lecturers and university workers to form rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the UCU and to fight for the broadest mobilisation of the working class to oppose the attack on pensions and university education being spearheaded by the Tories, the Labour Party and the entire corporate-controlled political establishment.

The SEP warns against the pseudo-left groups who pose as critics of the deal but who insist workers must continue to rely on the trade unions as the basis of their struggles.

Foremost among these is the UCU Left, who call for the offer to be rejected while advocating a return to the same negotiations that produced it in the first place.

UCU Left, whose leading figures hold key positions on the UCU’s executive—and once held a majority on the executive committee—has long provided a radical sounding cover for the union bureaucracy.

It cites the strikes as evidence that the UCU is being ‘reclaimed’ by its members. Writing on the defeat of the proposed sell-out in March, for example, the Socialist Workers Party—the main pseudo-left party comprising the UCU Left—claimed that “rank and file democracy, participation and militancy ... is the way to renew our unions.”

The reality is that this supposedly democratised union is now trying to shut down and silence rank-and-file militancy in order to impose a sell-out deal that has already been rejected!

Militancy and activism is not enough to oppose the UCU’s betrayals. What is needed is a complete break from

the corporatist unions, which are deeply entrenched in the structure of corporate management and the government and support austerity. University workers need new organizations of struggle and a new political strategy to defend the social rights of the working class.

Everything is being done by the UCU to wind down the dispute. Hunt has proposed “plans for a fresh ballot of UCU members to escalate the action further in the autumn and we will ask the employers to further improve their proposal so that it contains a ‘no detriment’ clause, if a NO vote is returned.”

The UCU has already set in motion plans to wind down and isolate the strike in the expected event of a No vote. The next set of strikes, scheduled to begin April 16, is limited to just 13 of the 65 universities previously engaged in industrial action. The UCU also ensured that strikes by its members in Further Education colleges, who are opposing a derisory pay offer, have been almost totally quarantined from those of striking university staff. To ensure the least disruption possible to FE management, the UCU called out members at just 15 colleges (out of nearly 300) for a token strike and then, weeks later, reduced this to just seven.

The strike by university workers is part of a global offensive by education staff, who in order to defend their livelihoods are being forced into conflict with the union bureaucracy. The SEP and IYSSE (UK) urge workers to form rank and file committees to break the organizational and political control of the UCU over their struggle. This would provide the basis for mobilizing all sections of the working class in the fight to defend jobs, wages, conditions and the right to high-quality, well-resourced education provision as part of the necessary socialist reorganisation of economic life.

For further details visit [Education FightBack](http://www.educationfightback.org)

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>