

Lecturers and students speak out in UK university strike

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By our reporters
26 November 2019

WSWS reporters spoke to university workers and lecturers on the first day of the strike at 60 higher education institutions.

London

Jessie, a PhD student at University College London (UCL), said, “I’m concerned about the increasing marketisation of higher education. It’s becoming more and more privatised and students spending more and more money. And that money isn’t going to staff, it’s going into large-scale construction projects. I’m a PhD student and I’d like to work in academia, but it’s becoming increasingly difficult.

“A lot of my friends who have graduated are in low-paid, limited-contract teaching jobs. With that kind of contract, you might spend 10 years teaching the same course and then they can hire someone else the very next year.”

Asked about the sell-out deal the University and College Union (UCU) reached with Universities UK last year over pensions, **Jessie** said, “I suppose there was a hope that with this independent review there would be some solution to the pensions issue, but there obviously wasn’t.

“I feel like we’re never going to win what I would like to see with one strike. I would like to see the universities stopping casual teaching contracts outright.”

S. Tempest said, “I teach at the school of Slavonic and Eastern European studies at UCL. I am striking year after year to get a better pension so that young people are attracted to my field and because I believe that we are not paid fairly.

“We are exploited, we are overworked, we are underpaid and we will be here until we win! It’s a long process, I totally sympathise with my students and they understand why I am on strike.”

Ben said, “I am in the English department at UCL. I guess, casualisation is the main reason that I am supporting the strike today because this is my sixth consecutive year-long contract.

“It is extremely difficult to get a permanent job in universities these days. And whilst it’s a job that I love, each year it becomes quite demoralising to not have any time to develop my own research, to do the kind of things that would enable me to get a

permanent job, and being 38 now and still not having a permanent job.

“This job is actually a 10-month contract, so the university doesn’t actually pay me for the summer months, despite a very heavy workload throughout the year.”

Another striker said, “I am striking today against casualisation, and increased workload that is put onto associate staff, teaching assistant staff. I’m a post-graduate researcher and have been teaching here at UCL for two years.

“I think what we are doing isn’t just for us, it’s for students too. If you want a high-quality teaching provision, which is what people are paying for, then you have to have high-quality teachers, and to have high-quality teachers they need to have good working conditions.”

Sylee said, “I am a third-year Philosophy and History of Art student. I really wanted to join staff members, teaching fellows and PhD students in this strike.”

Sheffield

At the University of Sheffield, **Umberto** from the Archaeology Department said, “We stopped the [pension] strike last year to allow a Joint Panel of independent experts to look at the issues. The panel came back with recommendations that the employers have just ignored completely. This is outrageous. The trust we placed in the negotiations has been completely betrayed.

“I’m very glad you asked about the relationship between our strike and the mass protests and strikes internationally against social inequality. It’s the same fight everywhere. It’s a fight against an economy that...carries on supporting people who already have privileges, while it keeps oppressing and neglecting and marginalising people who are in need. Whether you are in Hong Kong, in Bolivia, in Chile or in Lebanon, in Britain or in Italy it’s the same fight, it’s the fight against social inequality and social injustice.”

Sarah works in chemistry and said, “My concern is that the university education system is going for the lowest common denominator, which is cheapening and ruining higher education in

Britain.

“One of the reasons why people work in universities is that it isn’t a business-led commercialised thing, and now suddenly we are. The workloads are through the roof, and pay has not increased for years.”

Andy is a senior lecturer in landscape architecture. He said, “One of the main reasons I am here is about equality, and the pay gap between males and females across the university sector, a gap that is about 20 percent between men and women. We are looking for greater equality.

“We are opposing the increasing number of zero-hours contracts and opportunities for younger people coming into the sector so they can have a fair stab at things in their future careers.”

Merve, a researcher at Sheffield University, said, “We are striking for better pensions and pay. But this is about a lot of things going on at the university that are very neo-liberal, which causes universities, higher education, research and everything to be profit making.”

Nathan, a second-year student, said, “I am standing here in solidarity with the strike. When too much power is ceded to the top of any hierarchy, it is no good for anyone. If the bourgeois don’t give in to the workers on the pensions or the pay to underpaid workers in the university, it’s not good enough.

“If you look at global warming, the bourgeois, the capitalists are not helping that issue. They don’t care because they are laughing all the way to the bank. They only care about themselves.”

Ash, a maths student, said, “I think it is vital that students come out and support the strike. The conditions that lecturers have been forced to accept are ridiculous, it has adversely affected their pay, pensions and job security.

“Students are increasingly just seen as consumers, with education being completely marketised. But the relationship between students and lecturers should not be one of customers and service providers. Lecturers are the ones who support students to enable them to complete their degree.”

Professor Jim Chilcott, in Healthcare Decision Modelling, said of the strike, “This is a complex dispute, not a single-issue dispute. We are trying to redress a number of grievances that have built up in the higher education sector over many years.

“The principal reason concerns our pensions but also, importantly, to remedy a decline in real-terms income that has built up since 2009, with repeated below-inflation increases.

“We are striking about our terms and conditions of employment, the increasing use of casualisation, casual contracts throughout the HE [higher education] sector. And the failure to adequately remedy the inequalities within the pay structures of the HE sector, and the gender pay gap, which is stubbornly refusing to close.”

Motie, from the maths department, said the strike was about “rolling back neo-liberal dogma, the idea that we should all be market players, investing our pensions and putting our trust in markets and enjoying the thrills of gambling our pensions away. We don’t want that.”

“There is a feeling that defined benefit pensions are a quaint relic from the past, which should be eliminated to make us more competitive and more attuned with the market.”

Manchester

Dr. Anna Strowe, a lecturer in Translation & Interpreting originally from the United States, said she opposed management at universities who have spent the last “few weeks” putting “all their efforts into intimidating students, trying to find scabs, trying to find people who will teach our classes for us, trying to figure out if they can use video, instead of actually negotiating.”

She said one of the main issues leading to the strike was increased casualisation: “Definitely, the issue of casualisation is a model that is consistent with the way higher education is going in North America. The increasing use of poorly paid adjuncts that are being paid specifically for the number of hours in the classroom, but not necessarily for their preparation, not for the pastoral support for their students, not for the marking. They are precarious, they don’t know even a couple of weeks before a semester starts if they have a job, or how many classes they are teaching.

“There are these horror stories in the United States of teaching different classes at four different universities in order to make ends meet.

“I am from Michigan originally. Here I think one of the problems is that a lot of us from abroad, especially North America, know that the pay is lower than what we could get. I had a colleague in North America who was looking for work, and the starting salaries were twice as much as she was earning here.

“I think a lot of us were disappointed with the way the UCU leadership was approaching things in the last strike. At Manchester, we pretty much roundly rejected [the UCU’s sell-out proposal]. I remember the vote, we were doing everything but throwing stuff in the meeting. I think the [UCU] leadership this time are perhaps more aware.”

Asked about the recent High Court banning of a strike ballot by 110,000 postal workers, Anna expressed her disappointment, saying, “We were looking forward to having a little march and meeting up with the postal workers.

“I think there is an issue in the universities with perception, public perception, which is that universities are elite and elitist spaces. ... The reality is different...and we need to get out the message that we are workers, we are university workers and we have a common struggle with workers in other sectors.”

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