



Where now for the UCU dispute?

The tremendous UCU ballot result has now been followed up with three magnificent days of strike action including pickets, teach-outs and rallies across the country.

This is a sign of deep discontent within the sector. Years of pay erosion have now turned into a landslide with a pay offer of 3% for most at a time of rampant inflation. It has become apparent that pension cuts are more about the desire of university management to keep control of funds than worries over the pension scheme's viability. Meanwhile inequalities in pay and promotion continue as does reliance on precarious contracts. Increasing workplace stress has been a feature of the sector for many years but has worsened dramatically following the Covid pandemic.

Neo-liberal marketisation

All of these factors should be set against the background of broader changes which are currently reshaping university education. The neo-liberal marketisation of the sector has run into a host of contradictions and limits.

The consequences of this have been clear for several years now. Institutions have committed massive amounts of funds to building projects, often in partnership with private companies. Money has also flowed towards increases in salaries for top management and towards activities primarily devoted to keeping the market mechanism going. There has been no political basis for raising fees and consequently institutions have faced increasingly squeezed budgets. On top of all this we have seen income losses due to Covid and Brexit. Debt levels have soared.

The losers in all of this have been staff and students. Funding for teaching and research has been cut steadily and this has put both of them under tremendous pressure, most tragically exemplified in the rise of student mental health problems. The situation for non-teaching staff has been even worse; contracting out of services has been endemic. The votes for action last month result from this backdrop.

However, the scale of the task facing UCU should not be underestimated. Management is prepared to threaten punitive pay deductions. They are also prepared to sit out disputes, hoping that those taking action will get tired or dispirited. In addition, threats of redundancy or course closure can be used to weaken action.

Spread the action - link the disputes

The union has responded to this with widespread consultation about forms of action and the escalation of the dispute. This should not be taken lightly but to win we need more. Pressure from the rank and file within the union will be crucial. But we also need to look outwards – to build links with other campus trade unions who are not currently taking action, with students and with the local community. At the same time we must connect with trade unions in other sectors who are striking this winter and work towards joint activity.

The recent ballot results open up great possibilities for reversing the disastrous inequalities that have opened up within higher education over the last fifteen years. But realising these possibilities requires linking the disputes with a broader movement for social change.



3-4 Dec event:
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