



We are the university! Reflections on the 2020 strike of UK university workers

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University workers in 74 UK institutions are currently on a strike declared by the University and College Union (UCU). The UCU represents 120 000 academics, administrators, IT staff, librarians and PhD students – not only academics are on strike, but workers across the higher education (HE) sectorⁱ. This is the biggest strike since the Labour Party was defeated in the 2019 national elections. It occurs in a political context where the Tory government plans to curb trade unions' power further and, despite the rhetoric about retreating from austerity, it has no plan to redress the marketisation and neoliberalisation of HE.

These processes entailed the adoption of a business-like model that treats students as customers and makes universities overly reliant on tuition fees to compensate for reduced government subsidies. The UK government decided to uncap student numbers, which led universities to compete for student recruitment, shift spending towards marketing, and hire a new bureaucracy of managers tasked with improving student experience. Overall, universities are sitting on a £44.27 billion reserve (HESA, 2017) yet are claiming they have no money. For many rich universities, the deficit is not a reality but a political narrative deployed to justify top management's lack of concern for poor working conditions. On the other hand, the logic of market competition has meant that other universities are struggling to keep up financially.

The complete transformation of the role of universities has been laid bare by the Covid-19 public health emergency. Following market logic, most universities' senior management chose profit over people as the health emergency worsened, and largely adopted a 'business as usual' approach, thus failing to protect university workers, students, and society at large.

The issues at stake

The UCU strike aims to centre workers and students over profit and the market. The parliamentary route to defend workers' rights has been barred; hence, it has become apparent that workers need to act to protect their rights through trade unions. The issues at stake in the UCU strike are the same as those faced by several other categories of workers in the UK, with demands encompassing pensions and the 'four fights': pay, casualisation, inequality, and workload. The union has fought to keep the pension dispute together with the 'four fights', a synergy essential to keep the industry united, although casualised staff are less concerned with pensions and senior staff are less affected by casualisation. Nonetheless, the mandate for a strike over pensions was stronger than the mandate for a strike over pay and inequality issues, which might suggest the persistence of rankism among senior university staff. Externally, and

sometimes internally, academic work is perceived as an elitist vocation; we believe that academics must think of themselves as labour, and therefore as part of the broader workers' movement. It is necessary to counter divide-and-rule strategies that have imposed different forms of vulnerability across the workforce and created the perception of different group interests amongst workers.

The pensions issue follows a 14-day UCU strike in 2018 against changing the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) from a defined-benefits to a defined-contributions pension scheme. The strike won: employers committed to maintain the USS as a defined-benefits pension. Subsequently, negotiations regarding employers' and employees' relative contributions stalled, leading the union to declare the current strike. The proposed reform of USS is typical of the neoliberal process of individualising risk, where workers and households are increasingly made responsible for their own welfare now and the future amidst the retreat of public provisioning.

The 'four fights' against inequality and neoliberal work restructuring

The 'four fights' bring together various important issues that are symptoms of the ongoing marketisation of higher education and its managerial takeover. Casualisation is rampant in the sector. The latest data shows that 67% of research-only contracts and 49% of teaching-only contracts are fixed-term (UCU, 2020). Universities increasingly hire staff on atypical employment arrangements, including zero-hours contracts and hourly pay. This means that many university workers are not paid in the summer, face severe job insecurity and related mental health consequences, and often are not paid for tasks that they are required to do as part of their jobs. UCU has declared that casualisation is an attack on human dignity and casualised staff are second class citizens who are invisible, vulnerable, and deprived of agency and ability to plan their futures (UCU, 2020). A leaked document from a Russell Group meeting revealed that employers are perfectly aware that casualisation is detrimental to staff mental health and student learning and marginalises already-marginalised groups - but only consider it in terms of reputational damageⁱⁱ.

The fight against casualisation also begins to address various forms of structural discrimination and oppression that workers face every day in academic work. Women and Black, Asian and ethnic minority (BAME) staff are disproportionately affected by casualisation, which is partly illustrated by persistent gender and ethnicity pay gaps in the sector. The average gender pay gap is 14.8% - in some institutions as high as 30%. We do not have

comprehensive data on ethnicity pay gaps but a recent study in Russell Group institutions revealed a 26% ethnicity pay gap (Croxford, 2018). It is imperative to close both the ethnicity and gender pay gap with equal urgency.

Pay inequalities intersect with broader societal inequalities and uneven distribution of social reproduction obligations, which make marginalised social groups particularly vulnerable in the context of casualisation. Women, and women of colour even more starkly, face biased student evaluations – now a key tool to assess teaching – and greater expectations for pastoral care and administrative duties (Stier and Yaish, 2014). This also means that the sustainability of workloads, another of the ‘four fights’, needs to be assessed from a gendered and racialised perspective and by contract type. Two thirds of BAME staff reported bullying or harassment at work (UCU, 2016). BAME staff are more likely to be targeted by the UK’s ‘hostile environment’ policy to discourage immigrants from staying in the UK in the long term, and by Prevent, the counter-terrorism programme that, under the stated objective of reporting radicalism to the authorities, has policed Muslims and other minorities.

On March 9th, the UCU pickets turned feminist to highlight the importance of connecting various forms of struggle against gender, race and class exploitation in universities. On March 11th, UCU branches across the country joined a national day of action against Prevent.

Rethinking universities’ role in society

The ‘four fights’ highlight that the strike is not only about percentages of pension contributions but about radically rethinking the role of universities in society. Higher education is a public good, not a commodity. Access to UK universities has been severely compromised by increased tuition fees since 2010, causing student debt to accrue rapidly. The marginalisation noted for academic staff is reflected in the student body, such as the 13% gap in overall marks between white and BAME students. Education is central to social reproduction and highly unequal universities will reproduce highly unequal societies. Both students and staff have been forced to deal with a proliferation of quantified assessment and metrics, whose effectiveness in improving learning and teaching is dubious at best. Against stifling pedagogy into numbers, we need to reclaim the strike as a pedagogical space where learning is public, non-hierarchical, and creative. Most pickets have organised stellar teach-out programmes of public talks and open discussions that have created important opportunities for learning and exchange among students, staff and activists.

The strike is a vital form of resistance against neoliberal transformations of HE. At same time, the breadth of these changes forces us to rethink our strategies. Firstly, we could think of other forms of direct action against the bureaucratic

superstructures imposed on workers, such as boycotting the Research Excellence Framework, the government’s system for allocating research funding according to metrics of quality. Secondly, processes such as casualisation and the managerial takeover mirror trends in other sectors where there has been a transfer of power from workers who fulfil their industry’s stated purpose (teaching in higher education; driving trains in transportation) to managers and senior administrators. This situates HE amongst other sectors characterised by growing precarisation, in turn linked to the weakening and bureaucratisation of trade unions and labour’s loss of power. HE workers, therefore, need to forge militant solidarities with rank and file activists in other unions. Thirdly, the neoliberalisation of academia is a worldwide phenomenon and resistance should be coordinated internationally. Our managers are part of a transnational capitalist class; hence workers’ struggles need to be informed by global conversations and mutual learning. At the strike teach-outs, for instance, we learned about the 2016 Palestinian teachers’ strike and the Fallist movement in South Africa. Both movements clearly articulate how attacks on education are also attacks on broader political and socio-economic emancipation – a lesson for us all.

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¹ University support staff are also represented by UNISON, the public service union, which has supported the UCU strike with a parallel ballot. The

fragmentation of workers across different unions tends to hinder concerted action.

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ⁱⁱ The Russell Group is an association of the 24 leading universities in the UK. The leaked document is at <https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10760/RG>

[casualisation meeting minutes March 2020/pdf/RGcasualisationmeeting minutesmarch2020.](#)

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