

THE UNIVERSITY WORKER

Rank and File Strike Bulletin: Week 1, 25th November 2019

Reports

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We want to collect reports on the picket lines from across the country. In a national strike like this it is important we share information and tactics to strengthen each local picket.

Please send in short reports and pictures to:

editors@notesfrombelow.org

[@NotesFrom_Below](https://twitter.com/NotesFrom_Below)

We're aiming to produce reports for the next issue!

Help us distribute!

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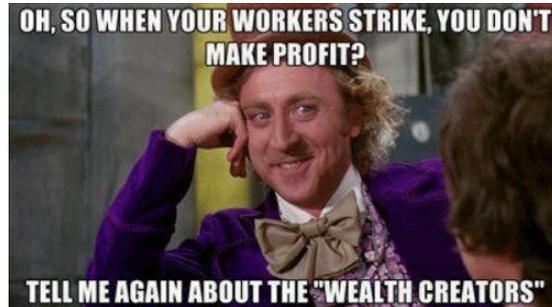
There will be picket lines across the country. We want to be on all of them. Download the PDF from notesfrombelow.org and print some out

Contributions welcome!

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Like we did during the previous strike, we'll be producing regular issues of *The University Worker* as the strikes and the dispute develop.

We welcome contributions for future issues that can either be included in the bulletin (in short form) or on *Notes from Below* (in longer form).



Between 25 November and 4 December 2019 members from across 60 universities of University and College Union (UCU) are set to start 8 days of strike action amid disputes over staff pensions, gender and BAME pay gaps, casualisation and working conditions. This follows the largest strikes in Higher Education in a generation in early 2018, with academic staff striking for 14 days over proposed changes to the pensions from a defined benefit scheme to a defined contribution scheme. On the face of it, UCU members are returning to the picket line to force the pension regulator UUK to adhere to the findings of the Joint Expert Panel (JEP) report. To many this appears to be a return to square one: one step forward, two steps back.

However, while the stalemate around pensions draws our attention back to the haze of financial technicalities, the legacy of the 2018 dispute has galvanized rank and file activism in Higher and Further Education on a number of fronts. Over the course of the year, a whole series of campus-based struggles have emerged forming a number of intersecting political imaginaries. Anti-casualisation organising has blossomed within and outside of UCU in institutions as varied as Warwick, Leeds, Birkbeck, Glasgow, Kent, Durham and Newcastle, forcing the issue from the margins to the centre of how we understand the marketization of education. Struggles against institutionalised racism have radically transformed student activism – especially the student-led occupation of Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action in 2019 and the current occupation at Warwick – giving a new urgency and vocabulary to the student movement. Meanwhile, student-staff support for the struggles of outsourced facilities workers has fledged a new axis of solidarity among precarious workers, with recent and on-going campaigns at LSE, SOAS, KCL, Greenwich, Birmingham, Senate House, Goldsmiths, UCL & UAL.

The strike offers an opportunity to consolidate and decentralise these emergent political perspectives around a broader transformative program. Neoliberalism is on the wane, even by the standards of its most enthusiastic ideologues it is reaching its limit, so we must be prepared to dictate the terms and content of its replacement in our workplace and beyond. Whilst Higher Education is under attack on many fronts, strike action on this scale in such quick succession from 2018 demonstrates the urgency to strategise across the sector and guide this momentum toward delivering radical change.

A picket makes the protracted crisis of our workplace visible in a collective manifestation of refusal. But it does not by itself explain why and how such a crisis has occurred. We must therefore use the picket as an organising space, a space for inquiry and a space for making demands. In the course of the next [7] days, we need to establish a nationwide forum where rank and file demands on the major issues of the ballot can be advanced from the local level to the leadership of our trade union. Collectively, the rank and file must draw its red lines on the issues of the dual ballot ahead of the negotiations. Now is the time to build a coherent and democratic program for change in our sector.

Sheffield

Day one of the strikes at The University of Sheffield began well – despite the early start in the rain picketers were in high-spirits as they formed picket lines across the campus. Numbers were swelled by the membership rise SUCU has experienced in the weeks leading up to the strikes – the branch is now at its largest membership level ever. Solidarity was evident as UCU members from departments with high numbers of members went to visit pickets at parts of the university with fewer members – this type of mutual support is key to keeping up morale and preventing potential harassment. Day one of strikes at Sheffield would have surely made UCU Gen Sec Jo Grady – a former Sheffield staff member – proud; days 2-8 will show all of USS, UUK and UCEA just what a united sector can achieve.

Sussex

Great turnout on the picket today at the University of Sussex for the first of 8 days of consecutive strike action. Many departments reported 90% strike turnout and large numbers of lectures were cancelled. At a lunchtime demo Caroline Lucas MP for Brighton Pavilion and Jo Grady UCU President addressed crowds of students and staff, with solidarity also being shown by the local FBU branch and by bus drivers who refused to come onto campus. The demonstrators then marched to Sussex House, where senior management including VC Adam Tickell (a former critic of neo-liberalism turned leading negotiator on behalf of HE employers) cowered behind an enhanced security presence. Despite the rain huge numbers gathered to chant and mock the absurdly-monikered VC, and the demo then dispersed to a series of events and teach-outs taking place in the neutral space of the Students' Union, who last week voted to provide wholehearted support to the strike. The fun continues tomorrow - just make sure to bring an umbrella!

Queen Mary

Though the East London weather may have been dreary, the first day of strike action at Queen Mary University of London was anything but. Pickets were set up from 8am at both the Mile End and Whitechapel campuses, with posters, and well-curated placards- 'Mind the Pay Gaps, Colin' set against a parody of the TFL logo perhaps being one of the best- plastered across university entrances. Lecturers and professional support staff ranging from Law, Politics, History as well as the natural sciences, spoke to and engaged with workers and students over pension, pay and working conditions. That men earn on average 15% more than our female colleagues is simply not on; that academics of colour are 10% more likely to be on precarious contracts is not on- and it was these messages- and others around pension poverty- that resonated with the people.

During the day, staff and activists also delivered a series of illuminating 'teach-outs' including speakers from the 'Save the Latin Villagee' campaign, and a talk from Hana Sweid, former Knesset member for the radical left Hadash; all which were kindly hosted by the Chaplaincy. In addition, members from the School of Law occupied their law building lobby, speaking to staff and students alike. Outside, university staff delivered their own worker- versions of hits from the Bee Gees to Earth Wind and Fire. Though the fun and energy sees no signs of abating, we continue to locate the seriousness of this dispute within the general marketization of our Higher Education.



Birmingham

More than 200 staff and students at the University of Birmingham joined picket lines for the first day of UCU strike action called over the pensions, pay and equality national disputes. Staff again called on the Vice Chancellor, David Eastwood, to resign as national chair of the USS pensions scheme, and for University management to address the significant local issues of workload, casualisation, and inequality in the context of the national dispute. Lecturers, support staff, students, and members of the NEU and UNISON all addressed a midday rally calling out University management on their repeated failure to address any of the points in the dispute, as well as wider concerns over human rights issues at the University's new campus in Dubai and failure to pay staff on time due to the failed implementation of a new IT system called 'New Core'. Staff have been threatened with further pay deductions for 'partial performance' if they do not reschedule classes, on top of strike pay deductions, and have been banned from campus throughout the strike period according to all staff emails.

Goldsmiths

At Goldsmiths there were big pickets outside the main building, as well as Deptford Town Hall—where management are based and the recent Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action Occupation was held. The turnout was good, with a day of teachouts organised on the picket lines. The students union offered support throughout the day and jointly hosted a Staff-Student Assembly to discuss the campaign with striking workers. The new Warden decided to deliberately target Associate Lecturers (precarious teaching staff) during this dispute, explaining that they would lose pay, unlike the previous strikes. In the face of the new aggressive management, the branch is actively trying to support casualised staff to fight back too.

MARCH FOR PENSIONS PAY & PLANET

Demonstration Friday 29 November, assemble at Malet Street, London WC1E 7HY
Marching to parliament at 12, then rally at 2pm Westminster Central Hall