



Workers' Liberty

for international working class solidarity and socialism

After UCU strike, what next?

By a UCU member

The University and College Union (UCU) lecturers strike on Thursday 24 March is the first ever national strike of UCU members in both further and higher education. The action is over a number of issues — pay, jobs and pensions in higher education and pay and pensions in further education.

Pensions is the issue that is providing most of the heat in this dispute. The clutch of proposed changes to the University Superannuation Scheme and the Teachers' Pension Scheme would result in all members paying more, working longer and getting far less. We are being told that is down the "public sector pensions time bomb".

But there is no "public sector pensions time bomb"! Hidden away within the recent Hutton report on public sector pensions is evidence that explodes this myth. Public sector pensions as a percentage of GDP are peaking now and will decline year by year to 2060.

Of course, you won't find this information in the mainstream press because it reveals the Tories attacks on pensions for what they are — a vindictive assault on the living standards of all public sector workers.

It is much to the credit of UCU that it has balloted and is taking action now. Activists in other public sector unions should be pressing for their unions to ballot now to link up the fight over pensions.

Apparently, the NUT will be balloting over pensions after Easter. This is really good news. The joint strike action in 2008 uniting NUT, PCS and UCU gave a big boost to all of us. Members still talk about the joint demonstration in London. Let's work to ensure that we see more of this in the coming months.

There is no point in unions waiting for some illusory "better time to fight". There is no point in building towards "one big demo" (i.e. on the 26 March) without any ideas about what to do next.

The Tories are racing ahead with their plans at breakneck speed because they want to create "facts on the ground" which will be difficult or impossible to reverse. You could read it as arrogance — they're certainly arrogant! But the other reason is because they realise how their unpopularity is going to grow and grow, and rapidly.

So where does the UCU go after Thursday? While the strike will undoubtedly go well, we need a coherent strategy to ensure enthusiasm isn't quickly burned away. An essential part of that strategy must be co-ordinated action across the public sector.

The other real and pressing issue is redundancies.

The next few weeks will see announcements on proposed redundancies across the sectors. We will soon be fighting on another front and within our individual institutions. This will present even more challenges but what's the alternative to fighting? Any union that sits back and accepts a huge tranche of redundancies this year will make resistance next year and afterwards ten times harder.

There's a parallel with the early years of Thatcher. The mistake the labour movement made then was not to launch a united fight early on. The Tories' policies now are designed to create mass unemployment to strengthen their hand. Let's not repeat the mistakes of the past. For co-ordinated national action across the public sector!

ESOL cuts

Government plans will see full fee remission restricted to students claiming "active benefits". All students claiming "inactive" benefits, such as income support, disability allowance and housing benefit will have to pay up to £1200 a year for their English classes. Students on low incomes, spouses of low-wage workers or benefit claimants and refugees and asylum seekers will also be obliged to pay. Action for ESOL, a coalition of teachers and students, is saying that people simply can't pay and the effect on our communities will be devastating.

- www.actionforesol.org

Students

The silence from the National Union of Students on the UCU dispute is deafening. Although when it so spectacularly failed to support its own members taking action, it's hardly surprising it won't organise any meaningful support for another union's strike.

NUS should be organising its constituent member unions on campuses to support UCU picket lines and equipping SU officers with arguments about why students shouldn't scab. Instead, it's ducking the issue entirely.

This proves, yet again, the need for UCU to work with activist networks independent of NUS, such as the National Campaign Against Fees & Cuts. While NUS is run by sell-out bureaucrats, it cannot be a reliable ally in UCU's fight.

- NCAFC: www.anticuts.com