

# “In order to be utopian, you have to feel utopian”

*Two perspectives on the recent strike at UK universities*

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At the beginning, the biggest strike action in the UK Higher Education sector was primarily about numbers. With 14 days of strike action at 65 universities across the UK, the protests against pension reforms this February and March marked the longest and biggest strike in the history of UK Higher Education. At the beginning, it was about money. More precisely, the strike was to protest employers' plans that would cut, by some estimates, up to £10,000 off the average academic's annual pension; which adds up to around £200,000 over the course of the average-length retirement. The employer, Universities UK (UUK), had proposed to change the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) from a defined benefit scheme, which guarantees retirement income, to a defined contribution scheme, which ties pensions to the fluctuations of the stock market. This was seen by many

academics and by the vast majority of members of the University and College Union (UCU) as an unacceptable threat to pension security. Hence, UCU called for the biggest strike action in its history.

But what started out as a strike about money and defined by numbers turned into so much more. As Jason Hickel put it in a blog post about the strike: “What we're really after is nothing short of reclaiming our universities from the banal and reductive logic of neoliberal capitalism - including the uberization of lecturers, the CEO-ification of managers, and the customerization of students. Because really, what's at stake here is the public university itself” (Hickel 2018).

So the strike turned from a focus on pensions to a much wider discussion about casualization, marketization, and the ever-increasing workload on academics' shoulders. It turned into a sounding board about the big questions, the biggest of them being: what kind of

university do we want? And that “we” included staff across the vast majority of the country’s universities, and within these universities, it included staff across all the different disciplines. And that “we” included students, which is something that the employers had not counted on. In their neoliberal conception of the university as a marketplace, where students are treated as consumers and staff are treated as content providers,

picket lines, voicing their grievances and complaining to management rather than their lecturers, voicing solidarity to their tutors, actively shaping the discussion about the current state and the possible future of education at teach-outs. There were more than 20 occupations of university buildings by students in solidarity with their lecturers. But, of course, students have their own numbers to bear: over the past 20 years, tuition rose



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UUK’s logic was that the students would demand the content that costs them in excess of £9,000 a year in fees alone and thus put pressure on staff who were, by taking strike action, withholding that content. The opposite happened. At universities across the country, students supported staff in large numbers and in various ways: joining staff on the

from the introductory £1,000 in 1998 to a staggering cap of currently £9,250 a year for UK and EU students studying in England, with the majority of the universities charging the full amount.

That “we” of the striking staff-student alliance did not, however, include me. Not because I thought the strike



action to be unjust or unjustified. To the contrary: I was and still am convinced that it was the appropriate reaction to increasingly inappropriate working conditions for academics, and I wholeheartedly supported my striking colleagues. I informed my students about the point and purpose of the strike, and I asked them to support it, by, for example, emailing the Vice Chancellor and joining the picket lines. Many of them did both. I donated money to our department's strike fund to help striking colleagues who are on hourly paid contracts and who struggle to make ends meet even under normal circumstances. I worked from home when I could so as not to cross the picket line. But I did not strike and I did not join the Union. I am on a temporary three-year contract, and I have a student loan to repay. To participate in the strike would have meant to dispense with half a month's pay and to not do any research for that same half month, when I only have 15 months of research time left on my current contract clock. So I could not afford to lose either, the money or the time. And that is another aspect of the neo-liberalisation and marketisation of higher education: striking becomes a privilege. Yet, many of my colleagues who, like me, could not afford to strike, did it anyway, and I admire their courage.

So what now? I asked colleagues who were on strike about their thoughts and experiences, and the consensus was that a lot of good came out of the strike: communication across faculties and departments, across staff and students. "Finally", one colleague wrote as a reply, "we talked about what is wrong with academia: the marketisation of education, tuition fees, pay cuts, precarious working conditions, the TEF, the fact that University management doesn't actually know what we do/how we teach and that their ideas of standardisation have nothing to do with reality. The fact that we ARE the university but 'they' run the university." Another colleague mentioned the strong sense of solidarity on the picket line, and how important it is to experience that you are not alone, particularly for people who are precariously "employed" and who do so much labour for the university, but who are so often unheard: "You look around and see that there are



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other people in the same predicament. That's really powerful." He said that the strike showed that another kind of University is possible; a university where lecturers are not content providers to students as consumers, but where it is about an exchange of knowledge; a university where what matters is the quality of education, and not new buildings. "In order to be utopian you have to feel utopian", he said. And I agree.

## Lena Wänggren, University of Edinburgh

As a trade union representative, for me and many colleagues, engaging in industrial action is never "just" about money, or about numbers. It is about something much larger and with centuries or even millennia (as I learned at a strike teach-out on workers' revolt in Ancient Egypt) of shared histories of struggles. Trade union work, which includes many aspects – campaigning and negotiating on behalf of members to improve policies, pay, and working conditions; ensuring members' views are represented at HR panels; educating staff about their own rights at work and protecting these rights; representing individual members in meetings with management; and working with other trade unions and social justice groups to create a fairer society also outside of the workplace – is at its heart about collectivity. By taking industrial action, then, something which can include

both strike action and actions short of a strike (such as working to contract), we not only fight for a specific issue, but engage in a collective care for others that has a long history of struggle, sacrifice, and care for each other.

I think that this collectivity and sense of shared purpose and strength, which I have always found in trade union work and other labour organising, became available to many members first during the recent industrial action in UK universities (note that the strike did not affect all universities, but rather those universities which use the USS pension



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schemes – many universities in the UK belong to different schemes). Recent decades' marketisation of higher and further education in the UK (following on similar processes across Europe, large parts of North and South Americas, Australia) has brought not only increased tuition fees for students, but precarious working conditions, cultures of performativity and overwork, and damaging individualising neoliberal managerial techniques. Whatever we do is individualised and metricised, ranked and measured (an Australian colleague told me about a manager putting up rankings of individual staff members – based on their publications – available for all to see on the staff noticeboard). And the life outside of work is fast shrinking, with many academics expected to maintain 24/7 digital personas and spend their evenings, weekends, holidays doing work for the university.

Against these above described individualising discourses and managerial techniques, the 14 day strike action brought a solidarity and shared sense of purpose which many colleagues had not before experienced. And what many of us also shared, on picket lines, at teach-outs and rallies, was this: our own strength and power as workers. This new sense of strength and unity was also seen online, for example in the various blogs, poems, and art works spurred by the strike. One such

strike poem declares to the employer:

Fuck you for sending me invitations to stress reduction courses

While you make me teach larger classes for less money.

Fuck you for sending me booklets with breathing exercises

While my workload grows higher and higher  
And fuck you, especially, for telling me to work on my resilience

While you try to dismantle the pension  
That I can't even pay into yet

Because you prefer to give me four casual jobs, rather than one contracted one.

(Krause 2018)

There is strength in unity, and together we can change the way things work. We can resist the slow grinding down of academics and professional staff in our workplaces, which result in not only ill health (physical and mental) but in certain cases death.

For me as a precariously employed worker, in addition to as a union representative, it was particularly heartening to see so many precariously employed colleagues taking industrial action. The fact that so many hourly-paid, fixed-term, and otherwise casualised (as the UK term has it) staff had the strength and bravery to stand up to employers who do not invest in them and – for those on so-called zero hour contracts – can refuse to employ them the next day. For these



colleagues, taking action meant a larger sacrifice than for permanently employed colleagues. I had many long discussions with casualised colleagues before the



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strike, many of them worried about their financial circumstances. A 2015 survey of staff on insecure contracts carried out by UCU reveals significant numbers of precariously employed colleagues struggling to get by: 17 percent say that they struggle to pay for food, 34 percent that they struggle to pay rent or mortgage repayments, and 36 percent that they struggle to pay household bills like fuel, electricity, water and repairs. One respondent states: “I especially dread the summer and Easter periods as I have no idea how I will pay the rent”

(Hunt 2015). If one takes action, one strengthens the strike, and if one does not take action, one weakens it. But as these above figures show, many union members cannot afford to pay their rent even during non-strike periods. Realising the dire financial circumstances of precariously employed staff, UCU made the union strike fund available especially for this category of members.

However, for some members the delay in pay or reduced pay that the strike fund could not help with, and the lack of any safety net, meant some simply could not take strike action without risking not being able to feed their children, or being thrown out of their accommodation. While I would not agree with Christin above in her statement that striking is a privilege (I would rather say that it is a collective sacrifice which not everyone can make), it is easier to take strike action for some, and more difficult (sometimes impossible) for others. As someone invested in trade union work and in the wellbeing of my colleagues, I am not at all angry at my wonderful precariously employed colleagues or colleagues with caring responsibilities, who could perhaps take only one day of strike action, or two, or three, rather than the full 14 days, or who in some cases simply could not strike at all without risking their own or their families’ health. I am filled with admiration and solidarity for those colleagues (and let us

not forget, precarity also includes those staff members on permanent contracts whose immigration status is threatened by taking action) who took action and stood next to me on the picket line, even if only for one day. I am however disappointed at the professors and senior academics who crossed picket lines, or who worked from home (which is also strike breaking), because they thought striking an inconvenience.

Taking part in collective industrial action is never easy. It is a sacrifice, done out of collegiality and care for the collective good. It means saying: I risk my employment, I potentially risk my career, I miss out on valuable research time, and I risk disappointing my students – but I do this alongside colleagues who make the sacrifice as I do, and we do it together and for the common good. This feeling of unity among colleagues has lasted, and will last, for much longer than the end of this recent strike. Considering the larger sense of purpose inextricably linked with trade union work, and industrial action, to my mind joining your local trade union, if you haven't already, must be a top priority. Some staff simply cannot join due to geopolitical constraints which make union membership difficult or (in some countries) illegal. But for the rest of us, this is the time. Is the union in your workplace too radical, or not radical enough? Does it have a history of excluding dissident voices, of racism or

sexism? Join it and change it. Do you agree with union principles, but have no time to attend union meetings? Join anyway, and be part of that collective which we represent and appeal to when negotiating with management on local and national levels. What is the alternative? If not now, when so many of us are at breaking point (or even past it), then when?

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