

Support our teachers and lecturers!

By Sofie Buckland, National Union of Students executive

On April 24th Further Education lecturers in the University and College Union (UCU) will hold a one-day strike, coinciding with strike action by the National Union of Teachers. This leaflet aims to explain the reasons behind the strike and why students should support it.

Why are FE lecturers on strike?

☆ FE teachers are paid 15% less than secondary teachers - for effectively doing the same work.

☆ They remain the lowest paid of all teaching workers.

☆ The Association of Colleges (AoC, the college bosses' organisation) has offered the same pay 'rise' of 2.45% as teachers received. With inflation at 4.8% this represents a cut and a brutal assault on living standards. The government claims on this are astonishing. Breaking with previous practice for pay negotiations, they now insist that offers are made based on the Consumer Price Index measure of inflation (although even this will be 2.5% by the time the pay rise actually kicks in).

☆ However, student loans have to be repaid at the Retail Price Index measure of 4.8%! This represents a contemptuous insult to the intelligence of education workers and has been a major factor in mobilising young teachers and lecturers for the strike.

☆ UCU is calling for a 6% increase or £1,500 - whichever is greater.

☆ The AoC has refused even to meet the unions until May.

Is this strike only about pay?

Pay is not the only issue. For example, College principals are now paid £100,000 on average -

but it's their pro-business orientation, their lack of democratic accountability, and their tendency to disappear to second 'jobs' such as government consultants that workers see as a bigger problem!

Education must be for everyone. Lecturers object to cuts in funding for poorer students, course closures, and colleges being run as "pack 'em in, skill 'em up" money-making qualification factories. Free access to lifelong learning must be defended as a principle, not on the basis that it helps a competitive job market expand!

This links students' struggle for free education, run for development of ourselves as human beings, not job fodder, to the teachers' and lecturers' strikes. If any group of workers force their bosses or the government to pay for higher wages, better rights or better services, it strengthens our fight - and that is doubly true when it's education workers on strike.

UCU and NUT's joint statement for their "Our schools, our colleges, our communities" campaign links coherently the damage to students education, detriment to staff conditions and negative effect on local communities inherent in government attacks on public funding of education, democratic control of colleges and equality of access to courses.

What is the National Union of Students saying?

NUS is formally supporting the strike, but doing little else beyond that. NUS has a poor record, and refuses to run an activist campaign for free education, decent funding or living student grants. Its current leaders, aligned to the leadership of the Labour Party, have repeatedly failed to organise mass, campaigning action against fees or marketisation, and only raise timid demands against the lifting of the £3,000 cap on higher education fees.

Most of the time, NUS's FE "campaign" does literally almost nothing; usually, when it does something, it's something bad. Last year, for instance, NUS wholeheartedly supported the FE Bill, paving the way for further privatisation of the FE sector - that means more highly paid college bosses with large expense accounts, running colleges like businesses, lowering lecturers' pay, privatising canteens and cutting back on services. Privatisation means a worse deal for lecturers and college staff, a worse deal for students (less teaching hours, more courses run to train us for crap jobs, worse conditions, more expensive food etc.) and more profits for college corporations.

Education Not for Sale want an NUS that leads the fight against repeated government attacks on education, and one that campaigns for the kind of education we want - one run in the interests of students, education workers and the community, not for the profits of business.

Why strike action?

Threats of militant action work - the government pay limit for public sector workers was supposed to be 2% - so why was the deal for teachers slightly above this, and why is the latest deal for nurses slightly better again? The effect of actual strikes, if the campaign is conducted properly, could win genuine victories.

The UCU/NUT action demonstrates what a serious campaign against the government looks like. For unions, strike action is the most 'militant' form of action that can be taken. Negotiations with the government have clearly produced nothing but empty promises and betrayals - NUS needs to take the example of the UCU/NUT action and move beyond these quiet backroom meetings to organising mass campaigns.

We are dealing with a government which is clearly determined to hold down working-class living standards, in the same way as it has committed to privatisation and cuts in funding for FE. Solidarity with teachers and FE lecturers on pay!

WHAT IS EDUCATION NOT FOR SALE?

ENS is a democratic, campaigning student organisation which for free education as part of a wider fight to transform society - to replace capitalism with a world which puts people before profit. We work with others on the left to challenge the right wing leadership of NUS and many student unions, organising action when they refuse to. For more information or to get involved, email volsunga@gmail.com, ring 07815 490 837 or see free-education.org.uk

Further Education is Not for Sale

FE activists in ENS will be launching a further "Further Education is Not for Sale" campaign at the Reclaim the Campus conference on Saturday 17 May. We want to bring together FE student union activists to organise a real fight over issues like fees, EMAs, privatisation and the minimum wage, as well as support for our lecturers and other education workers. If you want to see a campaigning FE network that challenges the inactivity of NUS on FE issues, please come and get involved.

Further Education is Not for Sale @ Reclaim the Campus conference Saturday 17 May, London School of Economics, central London (Holborn tube)