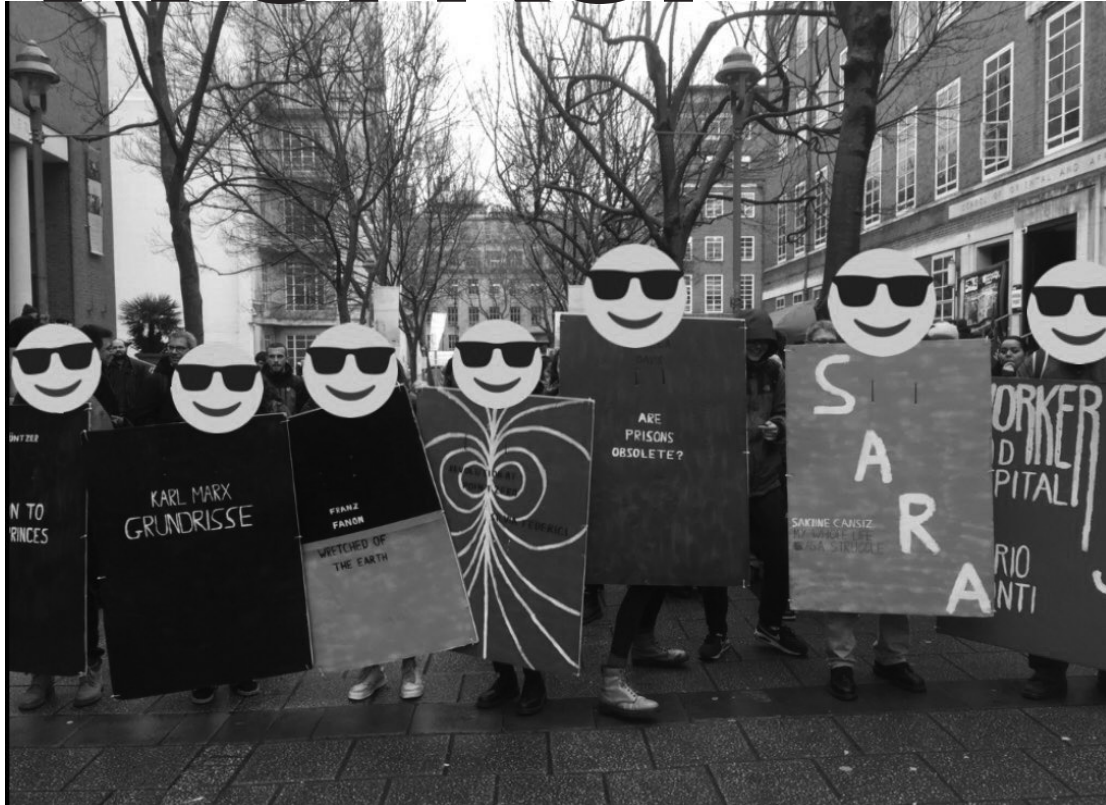


The University Worker



How we win: escalation as the path to victory

After the first two days of strikes (for most universities) we've returned to the energy of the pickets, with impressive stories of the strikes coming from universities across the UK.

Particularly heartening has been the level of self-organisation from staff and students, holding teach outs, discussions, and even reading groups on the picket lines. Students in Scotland occupied in solidarity and even the national union of students expressed its support for staff taking strike action.

We have taken the steps, again, to withdraw our labour with the aim of disrupting our universities. This means choosing not to take part in teaching, administration, and research activities—without rescheduling or rearranging the work. For those striking it means losing 14 days of pay.

Those of us on the picket line are refusing to let the management cut our pay and pensions, as well as further transform the university in their

own image. What is clear is that the current wave of strikes are not, on their own, enough to achieve the comprehensive victory we need. Employers have demonstrated time and again their callousness and untrustworthy nature—and we should not underestimate their desire to defend the current state of the industry.

Indeed, there is a danger that the strikes become a reenactment of last year with employers, once again waiting us out, confident that come the summer the energy will dissipate and the pressures on us to facilitate students graduating stop us from continuing until our demands are met.

Whilst the recent announcement by the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) that despite previous refusals to do so it would return to the negotiating table, it remains to be seen what these discussions yield, particularly over pay. Universities UK (UUK), who are responsible for our pensions have so far refused to make a new offer.

At the same time the repressive tendency by managers appears to intensify. Students have been excluded in Sterling University for a solidarity occupation, Leicester Staff has been threatened with block pay deductions if they were to 'demonstrate' on campus, and SOAS in central London has brought metal barriers on to campus to -oddly- prevent hard pickets. PhD students in Edinburgh have

been threatened with losing their funding if they join the industrial action.

It is clear that only greater pressure will force employers to back down. We need to return to the picket lines on Monday with energy, building on the confidence of last week. These collective moments are an important opportunity to build networks, strategise, and plan actions.

However, in order to win we need to escalate and use all the weapons in our arsenal—hitting the employers where it hurts the most. It is likely that further action will be necessary after the 14 days of action. At the very least, it will be necessary to demonstrate to the employers that we are serious about continuing action and ramp up the pressure if they do not meet our demands. We believe that it is therefore necessary to prepare for the disruption of both teaching and research into the new term, and that the union needs to lay the groundwork for these further actions now.

First, we should move to a national refusal to participate in exam boards and external moderation. The proposed marking boycott a few years ago was

the closest we came to using this tactic, but we pulled back from it. This could take a number of forms, from refusing to mark papers, to a refusal to release marks until our demands are met. Alternatively, we could also give all our students 100%—the university should be about more than grades, but our role in providing these is key to the university functioning.

Second, we should also move to collectively refuse to participate in the upcoming REF (Research Excellence Framework). This system is used to quantify our research for funding purposes and we all know it is a deeply biased and broken system. At present, universities are organising internal test runs of the REF and we should refuse to participate. It can be our test run also for a national boycott.

If employers know they can sit us out, it is likely that they will. By putting on the table further action, beyond march, that targets the continued business as usual in universities, we can ratchet up the pressure and bring a rapid—positive—end to the dispute. ■

Reports from different campuses

QMUL striking workers

The bad weather did little to dullen the collective spirit of university workers, students and supporters at QMUL. Alongside several pickets stretched across three gates, the infamous QMUL ‘strike playlist’ blaring out from the East Gate to the Queens Gate, workers had also curated and co-produced, with students, an amazing program of teach outs. Today honored and celebrated the work of the recently passed colleague and comrade Dr Daniel Kato, with a reading group on his book (*Liberalizing Lynching: Building a New Racialized State*) facilitated by workers from the School of Politics and International Relations. Under the headline ‘opening the doors of opportunity’, QMUL management perfectly co-opt narratives of inclusivity and diversity, whilst failing to address structural, institutional racism and sexism—visible in the university’s gender and race pay gaps. Many schools were joined by new colleagues at the pickets—and strikers hope that momentum will continue to build and maintain strong strike representation. With 13 days of strike ahead, QMUL strikers are set for a social tomorrow—transforming collegiality into solidarity.

SOAS striking workers

This is what solidarity looks like: SOAS United
Pelting rain, gusty storms, the freezing cold and a hostile management threatening to put up barriers could not dampen the high spirits at SOAS on the first two days of strike action. With UNISON members striking alongside colleagues from UCU, the infamous SOAS steps witnessed a massive show of solidarity. The first two strike days were full

of highlights: visits by UCU president Jo Grady and the leader of the opposition Jeremy Corbyn, FFFP [the local campaign led by precarious academic staff] members dancing to the tunes of the ‘noisy fractionals sound system’ playlist, the stellar line-up of teach outs, Justice for Workers [local campaign led by cleaners, security, and support staff] organisers joining the picket line after their shifts, the students’ cover song of TLC’s ‘No Scabs’. It also made us all looking forward for 12 more days of collective striking, learning, and organising.

University of California, Santa Cruz workers

Graduate student workers at the University of California, Santa Cruz have been on a two-week-long wildcat strike, demanding a cost of living adjustment (COLA) to combat housing and financial insecurities. The strike—which was organised outside of the student workers’ union local UAW 2865 due to its contract’s ‘no-strike’ clause—began when 250 graduate students withheld Fall quarter grades and eventually escalated into a full work stoppage on 9 February. Refusing to negotiate, university administrators have threatened to fire the wildcat strikers and summarily deport international students who withheld grades. Peaceful picket lines have been violently attacked by campus police, leading to over two dozen strikers and supporters being hurt. In response to the threats and attacks against the wildcat strikers, UC graduate students across the state have organised their own demonstrations, occupied administration buildings, and demanded that a COLA be applied at every campus in the UC system. General assemblies will be held throughout the UC system next week under the banner ‘Spread the Strike’ and call on students throughout the state to withhold their labour until university administrators concede to their demands and drop all retaliation threats against the Santa Cruz wildcat strikers. ■