

Fight for pay and defend education

A fresh wave of college strikes begins this week against the back-drop of major progress at Sandwell College and the moves by the employers' group the AoC to refuse to negotiate with the UCU over the 2018-19 pay award.

The importance of the coordinated wave of action was underlined by the result at Sandwell where UCU has won a pay rise of up to 6.5 percent over three years.

It shows that local action can work. But the AoC's response to the strikes has been to pull back from negotiations.

Rightly, the UCU is moving to ballot across the sector in response.

The strikes at Lambeth, Lewisham & Southwark, City & Islington, Haringey & Enfield, and Westminster Kingsway College are an important step in putting real pressure on employers to pay up after years of neglect.

Action

UCU could and should have pushed for more action this year. The fact that only a limited number of colleges have taken action must have encouraged the bosses' latest move.

If the UCU is to seriously challenge this attack then members have to know that its leaders are prepared to deliver the kind of hard-hitting action that can make a difference.

Colleges like Sandwell are proving that at a local level employers aren't all powerful.

But how much more effective would we be if the union was attempting to



Tower Hamlets college on strike last week

fight on pay and casualisation with the determination it showed over USS.

The USS dispute shows what is possible if the union genuinely attempts to win members to a serious strategy.

Thousands joined the union and while many of us believe far more could have been achieved, thanks to the members mass involvement the employers' defined contribution scheme is now off the table.

UCU won't beat back the AoC unless they know they will have to face a sustained fightback.

Track

But as the USS dispute showed, the only way to keep UCU's leaders on track to is to develop ever more powerful organisation among rank and file members.

Another lesson from the USS dispute is how crucial solidarity is.

It would be great if Higher Education branches could get down to the Further Education picket lines to show that nobody in the UCU fights alone.

We've won many political arguments on the importance of Further Education. Labour's front bench has supported our action and the fight for our students' future.

Squeeze

But we can't just wait four years hoping for a Labour government. The jobs massacres are happening now (as at Hull and Bradford) and the pay squeeze goes on and on.

Now is the time to turn things around. But that means UCU leaders showing as much determination to fight for FE as our members in London, Sandwell, Hull and Bradford.

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