

Education Worker

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What really happened at London Met?

On August 26th it was announced that London Metropolitan University had become the first UK university to have its highly trusted status revoked by the UK Border Agency (UKBA), meaning that it could no longer sponsor overseas students and that existing students could face deportation and be prevented from finishing their courses (Times Higher Education).

The student left, unions and the various left organisations reacted immediately with demos, letters of protest, petitions and the usual online campaigns. Most responses concentrated on the racism of the UKBA and the government's immigration policies. Others pointed to the lack of support for a university that mostly educated working class Londoners. While this is undoubtedly true, depicting this as merely an attack on poor old London Met by the UKBA and the Tories did rather let London

" continued mismanagement...

push for privatisation...

rush into partnerships with private institutions "

Met management off the hook.

For those of us in touch with workers at London Met, the crisis came as no surprise, and was clearly the result of continued mismanagement, and eagerness on the part of London Met management to push for privatisation and rush into partnerships with private institutions. Last year London Met was fined £6 million for over-recruitment. They also owe HEFCE £25 million for their failure to report student numbers correctly (THE). Management have dealt with the situation with threats of redundancies and more recently with a plan to out-source more or less all the non-teaching staff, transferring them into a "shared service" run by a multinational (see <http://www.londonmetunion.org.uk> for full details). The unusually active and organised union branches have been campaigning against this. A key factor in the decision to revoke London Met's highly trusted status was their relationship with a private institution, the London School of Business and Finance (<http://andrewmcgettigan.org/2012/09/24/update-on-london-metropolitan/>). LSBF does not have degree awarding powers and therefore needs a partnership with a university to validate its courses. Sources at London Met say that under their partnership with LSBF degrees were "validated" without adher-

ence to academic regulations and without the involvement of academics. The deal may have been signed off by vice-chancellor Malcolm Gillies without the involvement of Faculty management. Apparently Alfred Morris,

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Education Workers Network's

Workplace Organising Training Day

Sat 17 November 2012
(all day)
SOAS - London

Come along:

- ▶ If you want to help build a network with fellow education workers;
- ▶ If you want to discuss effective ways to build solidarity in your workplace;
- ▶ If you want to learn how to organise struggles in your workplace;
- ▶ If you want to learn how to WIN against your managers/bosses.

This is a FREE event, open to all those working in educational organisations, regardless of jobs, roles, etc. (managers NOT welcome!)

For more details, contact us:
ewn@ewn.org.uk

by workers - for workers

SAUL pension: a small and

In all the excitement of the large scale pension sellout following the largest public sector strike in a generation, you may have failed to notice a small, local pension sellout in the University of London, with the changes to the SAUL pension scheme in the University of London. This is now more or less forgotten, as UNISON moves on to a campaign over pay. Pay, not pensions, is now apparently the battle of our lifetime, with the union fully behind it.

SAUL stands for Superannuation Arrangements of the University of London, it provides pensions for the non-academic employees of the University of London, and one or two other organisations linked to HE who have joined the scheme. Up until recently it was a final salary pension scheme, and was considered one of the best pension schemes around, and was less in deficit than other schemes.

Changes were announced last year, including putting new members into a career average (CARE) scheme. As well as disadvantaging most new members, once a CARE scheme has been set up, the danger is that at some point the existing members will get moved into it, and fighting that change will be harder, as mobilizing those in the CARE scheme into defending those in the better scheme is a difficult task.

Several University of London UNISON branches immediately discussed the matter at branch meetings and voted to oppose any changes to their pension scheme.

The UNISON fulltimer who lead negotiations contacted branch

officers in mid-November telling them that they had negotiated with SAUL and had been assured that our fears about it being expanded were groundless, seemingly seeing no problem with taking this assurance at face value. They also said that they had won some other concessions to do with early retirement, that this was the best that would be achieved through negotiations and that this information should be shared with members and any other concerns or questions raised.

Understandably the branches who had voted to oppose changes were not happy with this, and asked to be balloted for industrial action, preferably to coincide with the other pension strikes on November 30th. They were told by UNISON full-timers that there was not enough time to do this, that despite threatened changes to their own schemes they would not be on strike on the 30th and that if they wanted to take strike action they would have to be balloted separately to take action on a different date. When asked how much time they had between Prentis announcing that UNISON would be on strike, and it being too late to get a ballot organised. The answer was one day. This was despite the fact that UCU were on strike in the University of London on the 30th and the rest of UNISON were also on strike over pensions. This meant that on November 30th a larger than usual number of UNISON members in the UoL refused to cross UCU picket lines and took unofficial action.

There were also questions raised about the negotiations. Unlike in the USS negotiations,

the unions had an equal say on the joint negotiating committee as the SAUL negotiators, so how was it possible for changes to be pushed through that members had voted against, unless the negotiators agreed to them? The fulltimer reassured branch reps that he had at all times "remained neutral" in negotiations! At briefings UNISON tried to present the changes as not being so bad, but were met with demands that the region back the calls for a ballot. While reps put their efforts into forcing the UNISON negotiating team back into negotiation, SAUL announced the changes to the scheme as a *fait accompli*, and even said on their website that the unions had agreed to the changes. Possibly because, despite the express wish of their members, they had?

Eventually members did get their say in an indicative ballot. By this time, not only had the changes to SAUL already been implemented, but the recommendation from UNISON was to accept them. Unsurprisingly, the turnout was low, and most who voted agreed to accept the changes.

As someone who kept in touch with what was happening throughout this lack of a battle, to me it provides a useful example of the way reformist unions undermine potential struggles. At the early stages, I saw not very militant or active groups of workers starting to talk about taking action over an issue that finally had them up in arms. This was exactly what they saw as the point of the union that they had been a member of for some time, perhaps for decades. And the opponent in this case?

local sellout

The University of London. The same institution that the Senate House cleaners have just won a victory against in their living wage campaign. This really did seem to be a smallish, winnable, local victory that a significant number of members would actually fight for.

Meanwhile, workers who initially wanted to take action realised that the whole thing was not worth losing a day's pay over, as with the attitude of their union 'leaders', often in this case, unelected, an unsuccessful one day strike is the most that's going to happen.

The problem for workplace militants in this situation is that many loyal union members who would never cross a picket line once they have been balloted and the action sanctioned by their union, are still not prepared to take unofficial action. So the lack of a ballot over SAUL for November 30th did not lead to as much unofficial action as some of us hoped. They instead just felt that the union had let them down and they may as well cross a UCU picket line and go to work.

We need to be getting the idea across to our co-workers that rather than fight a battle on two fronts against our employers and also against our union bureaucracy, we should be leading our own struggles. If we vote to oppose changes to our conditions of employment we should then start planning how we take action rather than having it deferred to an ideal moment, chosen by officials, which may never arrive. ■■■■

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previous VC of London Met is now chair of the board of LSBF.

Worth noting was the reaction of other UK HE institutions to London Met's misfortune. Birkbeck College did not waste any time, tweeting: "Birkbeck is a Highly Trusted Sponsor & is licenced to issue student visas. Holding a visa & looking for a course?"

And according to London Met workers, other universities actually paid people to stand outside London Met approaching students and touting for business. Perhaps not surprising as UK universities start to panic about the drop in enrolment in the first year of the £9 000 fees. Following a judicial review on September 14th, the UKBA's decision has been suspended pending a possible full hearing and a 'task force' set up to move international students into other institutions.

The crisis may have been averted for existing international students at London Met. The management who caused the crisis are still of course in their highly paid jobs and the workers are still facing the threat of outsourcing, something that has recently become a trend in HE. The question is, how do we fight this? Even with pretty strong union organisation in London Met itself, and interest from most left groups, the campaigns around the UKBA crisis left a lot to be desired. When the first demo was called, there were reports of students and even London Met workers being excluded from a planning meeting which only NUS officials and London Met sabbs were permitted to attend, which then made decisions about the protest to avoid it being 'hijacked'. The mass meeting

organised by the union branches and the students' union was well attended, but there was no planning for action, or even any opportunity to do so, or any attempt to ensure that such planning took place in the future. Instead there were two hours of top table speakers, followed by "questions from the floor", mostly prepared speeches by representatives from groups who had not made it to the top table. Even taking into account the various different ideas that go into the planning of such a meeting, why not at least limit speeches to half an hour, followed by an hour of actual discussion, and some attempt to get details of people who wanted to help? There was talk of occupation by students and workers, but no ideas about how this would happen, and there was also worrying talk of standing in unity with London Met management against the UKBA, despite the outsourcing threats, and the dodgy practices that had got London Met into this situation.

For the battles we are all going to face in HE in the near future, this is clearly not good enough. Top table speakers and NUS officials are not going to save the day. The recent strike ballot result showed that even with the whole UNISON hierarchy behind it, UNISON cannot get a decisive strike ballot result for a better pay claim when our pay has not kept pace with inflation for years, and we are affectively taking annual pay cuts, while the heads of institutions gain vast increases.

There is no substitute for organising with your co-workers and starting to take direct action, preferably before a crisis hits your own institution. ■■■■

Working to contract is not effective with academics

University and College Union (UCU) members in higher education (HE) institutions have recently voted to take action short of a strike over pay (70% in favour), but not strike action (44% in favour). The former (i.e. working to contract) has something very appealing for academics: it sings the air of the armchair industrial action. In my branch at least, members don't like striking: they don't like the idea of coercing managers and bosses; they don't like picketing; they don't like being seen as trouble makers. Action short of a strike is more in line with the reasons why they are in the union: doing something that is not too controversial, in their own time, from the quiet life of the office. It sounds like a softer form of industrial action, one that is not as radical and that does not require as much personal commitments and efforts as strike action.

During the pension dispute last year, UCU/HE members took action short of a strike over several months. In my branch (in a very conservative, home-county university) it was a complete flop. During the pension dispute, in order to try and make the work to rule action as effective as possible, some of us organised regular meetings to bring members together to discuss the problems they faced on a daily basis to put it

into practice, ways to overcome them, ideas to take it forward, etc. Attendance was usually between 2 and 5.

The main problem that was discussed in our meetings was the absence of specific contracts: for most academics, these don't state how many hours they should work per week, only 'as many as necessary' to carry out their duties, nor do they have clear statements of what these duties are. So it was always difficult to disentangle what was contractual from what was down to 'good will'. Also, there were recurrent complaints that it was difficult to know who was involved in the action, even say in a single department, and therefore to know whether or not individual efforts has any impact. In the absence of specific contracts, carrying out a working to contract action demanded much personal and collective efforts, which, alas! as far as my branch is concerned, very few people were willing to make.

But the non-specific contracts are not the only obstacle to effective work-to-contract action. What they reflect is in fact a strong work-driven culture. The research part of academic work is often seen, by academics, as the most interesting and valuable. In the context of cuts to HE budgets, senior managers' policies only reinforce this through pressures on staff to generate external research incomes. This means that academics usually think that they

are working for themselves, i.e. for their own career, rather than for their boss, so that anything they'll stop doing might turn out to be detrimental to their own career progression. Practically this translates into working far more hours than the normal full-time week, at weekends, during holidays or even not taking holiday entitlement at all. During the pension dispute, it became plain that UCU members in my branch didn't want to 'sacrifice' their research during action short of a strike: they didn't mind cutting on admin duties but not on their research, with rather ironic scenarios where some would end up working more than normal during the dispute because they could devote more time to their research.

Given this and the poor results that action short of a strike during the pension dispute led to, it is hard to see how it could be effective with the current pay dispute and why UCU/HE members are being balloted for it. The trouble with this form of action is that it is very misleading: it plays down the radical nature of industrial action, which is why I think it is so appealing to academics; but at the same time it can only be effective if it is actually built and carried out collectively (i.e. according a key principle of industrial action), something that our meetings during the pension dispute made totally apparent. The inability or unwillingness of most academics to accept this means that, in HE, this softer form of industrial action is mostly toothless because it remains individualist. This probably answers the second question too. ■■■■

Education Workers Network

EWN is made up of Solidarity Federation members who work in the education sector. Joining EWN also means joining your nearest SF group (solfed@solfed.org.uk or PO Box 29, S.W. DO, Manchester, M15 5HW for details). Even if you don't wish to join us, we welcome requests to join our discussion list (ewn@lists.riseup.net) and / or for bundles of Education Worker. Also available: EWN intro pamphlet; basic EWN intro leaflet; back issues of Education Worker. EWN, c/o News From Nowhere, 96 Bold Street, Liverpool, L1 4HY. ewn@ewn.org.uk; www.ewn.org.uk

EWN Intro Pamphlet

Building a Revolutionary Union for Education Workers

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