

PNYX

WEEKLY COMMENTARY, RESEARCH, AND REVIEW

March 5, 2018

ISSUE 37



Above: Strikers at UCL (Photo: David Roberts)

SINCE FEBRUARY 22 University and College Union members have been striking against measures proposed by Universities UK — the primary advocacy organisation for universities in the UK — that would effectively dismantle the University Superannuation Scheme (USS), a pension scheme upon which higher education professionals, already precariously employed, depend. This week we feature Mollie Claypool, who explains why she and fellow lecturers are taking action, as well as Alfie Stephenson-Boyles, from Mollie's unit at the Bartlett, who explains why he and his fellow students support them.—EDS.

WHY I STRIKE

Mollie Claypool

I DON'T WANT to go on strike. I'd rather host the Bartlett MArch Unit 19 midterm crit that we had scheduled with 5 guests from cross-faculty and outside the university scheduled for the first day of strike action. I'd rather teach my theory seminars. I'd rather be

working on my research: I have two major deadlines in the next month. I'd rather meet with BSc Architecture students who may need more academic support, be in school management meetings, review feedback and interview Year 1 applicants. I'd even prefer to work on grant applications (and I hate writing grant applications). I'd rather not lose my full day of pay for every day I am on strike. We barely, just barely, make ends meet as it is.

But, I am striking.

Why is it important to strike even though my strike has such an impact on my students' education? Why is it important to strike even though it will affect my colleagues' ability to do their jobs?

Bartlett MArch Unit 19 works on the relationship of labour to space, speculating on what disruptive spatial, social and economic models for a post-capitalist and post-work society might look like in the near-now of architectural design, fabrication and assembly. As you may suspect we are fundamentally against the neoliberalisation of higher

education — which is what this strike action is really about. This strike action is about design, about how structures of power affect how we inhabit space. It is about how the flow of capital influences the way we can influence the design of the society we live in and the society we want to live in. It is about the relationship of spaces of work to spaces of leisure. It is important to strike, to participate. Striking helps us gain a greater understanding of these processes in order to find ways to disrupt the current models of power in whatever ways we can as architects and designers. It is also important to not be a hypocrite and to 'practice what I preach'. It is important to be honest, and transparent, about what this means and the effect it will have on our lives and our students' lives. For me and for them this strike is so clearly an opportunity to learn.

I took time to discuss with the students of Unit 19 what strike action meant, for me and for them. As a result my students have come out as a group in support of me striking. I feel

so touched — and proud — that they understand this strike goes beyond their midterm crit, beyond their individual academic experience. I like to think that is the tangible effect of my commitment to them, to my job, to architectural and higher education. It's a blessing to be able to see the effects of your teaching in real time with real action.

I am NOT unique in that I worked for the majority of the early part of my career in academia thus far in multiple temporary, fractional and underpaid forms of employment. I am NOT unique in that I have accrued what can only be referred to as a 'mountain' of student debt in order to become highly educated enough to do my job. I am NOT unique in that I regularly — daily, not weekly or monthly — work beyond my contracted hours and the duties of my job description. I love architecture. I love my job. I love my students. I believe deeply in the importance of delivering high quality architecture education. I am NOT unique in that either.

I have spent the last four years as the Programme Co-Director for the BSc Architecture course at the Bartlett. These are the students who have been most affected by the marketisation of the university. The student-as-consumer model has transformed how we deal with progression rates. These are the students who are most affected by the casualisation and fractionalisation of roles. Although we have worked hard as a school and programme to put design staff on permanent contracts during my (our) tenure, it is still so clearly not enough (most design staff are not striking).

These are the students who are taking on debt that will follow them for much of their professional lives. These are the students who due to this financial pressure, combined with a hugely competitive job market, have higher levels of mental and emotional stress than in previous generations. These are the students who see less economic and social diversity amongst their peers due to higher education becoming, rather quickly, for the privileged few.

These are the students who are, as a result, taking less risks. They are playing it safe. They are trying to ensure they have a possible financial future with a good and reliable job. But, to be a leader you need to be able to take risks. To be experimental, creative, progressive, innovative ... you need to be able to take risks.

Thus the quality of our pensions is important. Whether employers like this or not, they are part of making us more committed and dedicated to staying in higher education, to delivering the best architectural education

possible, with the most amount of energy and empathy for our students. It directly relates to how much we are willing to go above and beyond the normal call of duty for the future generation of architects. When the security of our pensions is taken away from us, as is proposed by USS/UUK in the change from a defined benefit scheme to a defined contribution scheme, they make the nature of higher education employment — highly competitive, precarious, underpaid — even more difficult to deal with day in and day out. I am set to lose 52% of my annual pension income when I retire — likely somewhere around age 70 — if these changes go ahead. This country is at risk of losing its best young minds already due to Brexit — this current move by USS/UUK feels like they are just throwing in the towel on the 'brain drain'.

And so we see the neoliberalisation of higher education in action with the moves by USS/UUK. So if we are all concerned first and foremost about our research, our teaching and most importantly, our students — the next generation — which I believe we all undoubtedly are, then to strike against the changes to our pensions is to ultimately strike for the health, quality and success of their educations.

This is why I strike.

WHY WE SUPPORT THE LECTURERS' STRIKE

Alfie Stephenson-Boyles on behalf of Unit 19 at the Bartlett

IN Unit 19 we are investigating ways in which as architects we may disrupt normative methods of designing and building, proposing systems which provide greater agency to the end-user. Our tutors have provided us with the tools to take this political battle to the construction site. We see it as imperative therefore that we take up our position in support of our tutors in a different, more pressing and imminent danger to our education and their livelihoods.

University education perhaps stopped being a public service when the first introduction of tuition fees came into place during Tony Blair's government in 1998. It wasn't until 2010, when David Cameron and Nick Clegg's coalition government oversaw a trebling of tuition fees and 40% cuts to university teaching budgets that I became aware of a broader restructuring of our education system. I was stood by the doors of 30 Millbank while hundreds of protesters raced across the plaza, breaking down the panes of glass and storming the Conservative headquarters during what otherwise was a peaceful and powerful display

of student activism as 50,000 people marched past Westminster in November 2010. This was before I entered higher education, and I was fortunate enough to be in the final year of entrants into university on the lower fee system. Since 2010 there have been more ways in which higher education has been endangered, including the scrapping of maintenance loans in 2015.

Today we are stood in the freezing snow, outside our own institution, the Bartlett, and our education is experiencing another wave of change — this time altering the pensions of our teachers, only two years after they were already fundamentally changed. As students in higher education in 2018 we are consumers, and as consumers we demand an extremely high quality service. This service is under threat as our tutors and lecturers are handed a bargain bucket pension scheme; a quick fix solution to a £6bn deficit. The result is a potential reduction in pension payments of £10,000 per annum. Given that they are one of the main reasons (among many) that UK universities attract some of the best academics from around the world, the attack on pensions will have a direct but long-term impact on the standard of our education.

However, the fundamental character of education is that it is not merely a consumable service. Education is a public service, as are pensions. Throughout our education, students and tutors make significant demands of each other in a collaborative effort towards our increased understanding of the world. The relatively low financial reward that our tutors receive for the graft, patience and dedication they give to our futures has until now been marginally offset by the reward of a decent pension. If our education is under threat, so too is the very substance of our profession and the standards that we are to uphold as servants to the betterment of our built environment.

Mollie is a Lecturer in Architecture at The Bartlett School of Architecture, where she is Programme Co-Director for the undergraduate BSc Architecture course and Design Tutor for MArch Unit 19. She also is Co-Director of the research laboratory Design Computation Lab.

Alfie Stephenson-Boyles is a Year 5 Bartlett MArch Unit 19 student

More information on the strikes can found at ucu.org.uk/why-we-are-taking-action-over-USS

For strike news and info about events that all are welcome to join, see "The Strike Chronicle": www.s-t-r-i-k-e.org/chronicles/