

# When working conditions are our learning conditions: Students show solidarity with striking University of York staff

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University of York undergraduate students Max Abdulgani (left), Owen Buchan (middle) and Neo Allert (right) attended a rally in Exhibition Square to support University of York staff on strike.

## York undergraduate and postgraduate students explain why they are supporting strike action.

On Wednesday 2nd March, a group of University of York staff, students and supporters gathered in Exhibition Square in York in an end to three consecutive days of strike action.

Organised by the University and College Union (UCU), a total of 68 universities across the UK have participated in ten days of strikes since 14th February.

According to UCU, the industrial action is down to disputes over: the gender, ethnic and disability pay gaps; casualisation and precarious employment practices; unsafe workloads; and falling pay.

Amongst the crowd were several University of York students who wanted to show support for the strike.

Max Abdulgani, a first year Politics and International Relations student was one of the many students at the rally. “We had to show solidarity with all the strikers and the lecturers at university. They’ve been through an incredibly difficult time. And the fact of the matter is they haven’t been shown half enough support as it should have been by the university.”

“It’s really kind of the classic story of being overworked and underpaid,” said Owen Buchan, a second year Politics and History student. “Pensions are being slashed. Lots of academics have been recommended to mental health services because they’re working up to 60 hour work weeks, but are only getting paid for 40 hours. So it’s a huge injustice really.”

Neo Allert, an international student from Germany in his first year studying History and Politics also attended the rally to show support. “I’ve always admired the British university system. And now coming [to the UK] and seeing these really, really blatant injustices unfold before us and we simply cannot do anything but go out on the streets in the rain for an hour today and stand up for what we believe in. And that is a good education and good working conditions for everyone, not only for the lecturers and the seminar tutors, but for all university staff.”

The students believe that pay is an issue, especially when compared to the amount of time and effort university educators and staff spend on their jobs.

“I can’t even believe that I have to say this in 2022, that women are paid less in the same jobs as men, that people of colour are paid less than white people,” said Allert.

Protesting staff, students and supporters alike believe that it is within the means of the University of York to address these issues and that more money can and should be invested in staff.

Abdulgani comments on the costs of the Church Lane Building, one of the newest buildings on the University of York campus. “It was a fantastic building, and we’ve got fantastic resources in York. But actually, we need to see this money being spent on the lecturers—the people who are here everyday supporting us and who don’t just work their contracted hours, but they work outside of that and don’t get paid for that.”

“These are people we see every day and they do an incredible job trying to teach us. It’s not fair that they’re put under all this pressure and stress,” said Buchan. “The motto they keep telling us is the conditions they are under are the conditions we learn under. So it affects everybody really.”



Vitor Leme (left) and Martha Roberts (right) are masters students at the University of York. Photograph: Rebecca Mendoza

## A postgraduate perspective

“I think it’s critically important to support the lecturers and the staff striking, because especially as postgrads, you never know if you are going to end up in academia. That could be your job,” said Martha Roberts, an MA in Sustainability Studies student.

Masters students typically study for one academic year, so the impact of the strikes can feel greater.

“We’re only here for a year, so we feel already ostracised from the campus and the student body. So when there’s another hit with strike action, it’s just kind of if you kind of feel a bit down about it,” said Roberts.

“The general line is their working conditions are our learning conditions,” she continued. “Education is being increasingly marketized which affects negatively both staff and students. And so we should be fighting against that as a unified force.”

“As international students, we pay a lot to be here. We pay full tuition, and it’s a lot of money, especially if you come from developing countries like Brazil, like where I come from,” said Vitor Leme, an MA in Applied Human Rights student.

“To come here and see that the quality of their work is not as good because of working conditions and because they’re overworked and underpaid, that is really terrible for us. And so I am here to support UCU and to support these students, and to let the university know that if I’m paying enough, they should pay enough for the professors.”

Leme wants postgraduates who are unaware of the strike and its reasons to reach out to university staff. “I would suggest them to talk to their professors and module conveners about their working conditions before judging the strike, before thinking only about yourself.”

Roberts agreed that students can benefit from having more conversations with different people from the university community. “By overcoming these issues like marketization and casualization, they will positively affect us all. So just like strike up conversations with the people around you, your peers, your lecturers, your module conveners and I imagine it will lead to some very interesting and fruitful conversations.”

## What does the wider student population think about the strikes?

“I definitely think it’s like a silent majority situation,” said Buchan. “You know, not every student is going to be out every single day protesting. But if you speak to any student in York they would say, you know, ‘of course, I want the people who are teaching me to have fair conditions.’”

Allert believes that many students are unaware of the strike and reasons for it. “If they actually knew, I think more people would come and actually show their support.”

Leme and Roberts refer to a recent University of York Graduate Students’ Association (GSA) poll which indicated that much of the postgraduate body supports the strikes.

“I believe that most graduates think the same, that they want professors to be able to deliver really good work for us,” said Leme.

According to the University of York’s GSA official statement, results of a survey sent to postgraduate students indicates that students are “overwhelmingly in support of the strike.” The GSA states that “the increasing casualisation of higher education is a matter of significant concern to the Council members, considering the current contribution of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and any potential contribution of future academics to higher education.”

## What do they want people to know

“We’re all in this together, we’re all behind the academics,” said Buchan. “Speaking personally, as someone who might go into academia, it’s quite harrowing to see a potential future that I’m stepping into. So, on a personal level, I’m fighting to make sure that everyone who wants to go into academia, and everyone in academia, can have a good future.”

“Just to reinforce the point that students are standing behind the striking staff,” said Allert. “We understand the issues and we care. It’s important for every striking lecturer and university staff to acknowledge the fact that we are here and we support them.”

Abdulgani comments on the impact trade unions have had to improve working conditions. “If you keep the fight up, we can get somewhere we can make progress.”

## ‘We can’t stop believing’

While deeply concerned about the issues, the students also believed that any change would be part of a slow process.

Buchan described his feelings as “cautiously optimistic”—a feeling that other students shared.

“I think that we can’t not believe in [the strike],” said Leme who has studied the impact of strikes through his human rights work. “It is a really long struggle, a really long walk to see effective change. But at the same time, we can’t stop believing in it. Because at the moment, we’ve stopped believing nothing will change. So we only lose if we give up.”