

Britain: Barnsley College lecturers protest threat of redundancies

Our reporters
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A demonstration by the local branch of the University and College Union (UCU) in Barnsley was held June 20 to oppose the threat by management to make 53 lecturers redundant. Many of the lecturers may lose their jobs altogether, while others will be invited to reapply for lower-paid assessor posts filling the role previously filled by trained lecturers.

Around 200 university staff and students, mainly from Barnsley and nearby Doncaster, took part in the demonstration in the city centre and heard speeches from the local UCU branch.

The assessor posts require only a level 3 further education qualification. Unlike lecturers they do not require a PGCE teaching qualification or a degree in an appropriate academic subject. The pay rates for the lesser qualified assessor posts are significantly lower.

Thousands of Further Education workers across the country face the same threat as Barnsley College employees, but the UCU has given little indication of organising on a national basis to oppose cuts. The UCU has instead accused Barnsley College of failing to meet its legal requirements regarding consultation about any job losses.

The UCU head of Further Education, Barry Lovejoy, said, "This is an ill-thought out, knee-jerk reaction. Rather than panicking the college should ensure it meets its legal requirements by entering into meaningful consultations with UCU on ways to avoid job losses. Make no mistake the college is risking industrial action if it fails to step back on these proposals."

Barnsley College management claim the college is technically insolvent because funds promised for redevelopment by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills have failed to materialise. Barnsley College's planned £55 million redevelopment has been left in limbo

since the national college building programme was frozen in January.

The college has already demolished half of its buildings and is £10 million in debt, after borrowing from the banks to pay for the demolition.

The LSC gave the thumbs up to a series of college redevelopments across the country and even encouraged colleges to expand existing plans and go for so-called "iconic" architecture. Such designs do not come cheap. The LSC eventually approved plans that amounted to double the budget available. Only when this revelation became public did the LSC freeze the construction programme.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling has granted a further £300 million to the LSC to assist colleges through the crisis, but the quango is dragging its feet over exactly which colleges will benefit from the public funding. Colleges expected to learn their fate when the LSC's governing council met June 3. However, the selection process has been delayed for a further three months.

Classes have been moved into other inadequate classrooms on site, whilst other classes have been relocated outside the college.

One worker, who asked to remain anonymous, explained, "The way everything is up in the air for us and the students is extremely unsettling. We are talking about teenagers and adults who have severe learning difficulties, whereby if they don't come to college could put them at risk.

"They are talking about bringing associate teachers in. We currently have eleven full time teachers and they are advertising for two. How will they manage to teach and support students with complex needs and behavioural difficulties? Employability is not always an option for these young people."

Another member of the department said, "The way this

proposal has been done, there has been no consultation, we have just been given envelopes. These are adult learners who have enrolled for two year courses and have only three to four weeks to go now. I found out more in the local press than from the authorities. What I would like to know is how and why, who made the decision to go down this road? Is it legal?

“It’s a travesty. Ninety jobs have been advertised in the *Times Education Supplement* because they have got round this by calling them something different to teachers. They are ruining people’s lives and destroying student’s chances. In this economic climate, it’s disgusting that there won’t be any retraining for people. We have students with learning difficulties at Barnsley College who are sixty years old. What are they going to do? Who is going to explain to them what they are going to do?

Mariam, an A level Psychology teacher, said, “This is all about money. About four years ago they cut adult provision at Barnsley College. They only offer Math and English at GCSE. The writing was on the wall then. We not only teach sixteen to eighteen and nineteen to twenty-four years, but the fourteen to sixteen who study vocational courses. A lot of the providers for this have not got teaching skills or qualifications.

“Four years ago they redeployed most of the teachers and some took redundancy. Now in education, everything is target driven and they use this as a stick to beat you with. They are not ‘student centred’ but ‘target centred’. For example when you give a student a predicted grade, you are told to give an aspirational grade, not the one you think they will get. When they don’t achieve the aspirational one, you don’t hit your target.

“These new jobs that have been advertised are called Associate Teachers on term time only contracts, not on a teacher’s pay scale but on support worker pay.

“They have annihilated our Special Educational needs department. We now have a Dyslexia coordinator who is not on a teachers’ pay.”

Jackie, who teaches psychology at nearby Northern College, said, “The Associate’s role is a full teaching role. But someone comes in and takes a folder off the shelf and just delivers it. They will have no input in creating a lesson, or analysis and assessment. They will have no subject knowledge.

“You can be a brilliant joiner but not have the skills to teach it. Some people have the presentation skills but not the knowledge. There is a de-skilling and devaluing process taking place, which I have seen in Northern College over the last few years.”

Olga Gajczyk, who is an English as a second language student, also works as a teacher in a Polish Saturday school. She said, “I think there are currently good opportunities for people who don’t speak English at Barnsley College. But they need qualified teachers, not just conversationalists who can’t explain the grammar. Even the schools in which I work teaching Polish, they can’t explain these things because they don’t have that knowledge. Sometimes there are small things you need to understand where someone who is qualified can tell you the rules and practice.

“Immigrants have to pay £450 for a level one English course for six hours per week. We have to work hard to earn that. No one will work so hard if the teacher isn’t qualified. As a teacher of Polish I have to explain difficult words, therefore I need the language skills to do this.”

Matt Young, a young mobile phone worker, said, “The situation needs to change. I have got a lot of friends out of work, who have worked all their lives, and are now looking for jobs. They go to the Job Centre but don’t find much help. They don’t want to make a career out of £64 a week.

“I think the British way is that they take everything that is thrown at them. Things get accepted, and not fought against. I’d like it to change.

“The majority of people would fight but they’re disillusioned. Who are they going to vote for? There are a lot of questions, but no answers. My dad was a miner and went through the year long [1984-85 miner’s] strike like everybody else. These attacks are taking place because they want to save money.”



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