Britain: Thousands of education jobs cut with trade union complicity

Robert Stevens
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A massive retrenchment in further and higher education is being implemented by the Labour government, with the active collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy.

Thousands of job cuts are being made among lecturers and staff at universities and colleges amidst a freeze on education spending.

When it assumed office in 1997, Labour embarked on a policy of a general expansion of further and higher education. This was based on the underlying conception that in order to compete internationally, Britain had to develop a “skills economy” requiring a constant stream of graduates. The government set a target whereby 50 percent of all school-leavers would go to university. In 2007 the number of 17- to 30-year-olds participating in higher education was 39.8 percent.

With the onset of the international depression, the ruling elite have ended this policy and have begun to make massive cuts in education spending and provision. This is accompanied by a renewed emphasis on education as the province of a privileged minority.

Earlier this year the government cut back on its previously planned increase in student numbers and demanded universities impose £180 million in “efficiency savings” by 2011.

According to new figures from the admissions service Ucas, many young people will now face a future on the unemployment rolls. Ucas has predicted that by the end of this summer some 600,000 people will have applied for a university place in England. This is an increase of 40,000 places (9 percent on last year). But the government had initially said that it would only fund an additional 15,000 places, before capping the number at 10,000. The actual places available are set to be even lower. The chairman of the Commons Education Select Committee recently stated that he had been informed that just 3,000 extra first-year places were to be funded.

Those denied the opportunity of going to college or university will face a future of unemployment and poverty. Estimates are that up to 1 million young people will be jobless by September.

According to research by the Universities and Colleges Employers Association, up to 100 institutions are planning to impose redundancies. Lecturers and staff at two thirds of higher education face job losses, cuts in pay and working hours.

At Salford University, 140 job losses out of a planned 150 have been carried out. At City College Birmingham, 76 jobs are to be shed on top of 75 that were cut one year ago. This will result in the college losing nearly a third of its teaching staff in just over a year. At Cardiff University, management plans to cut 140 jobs and end 250 courses at its Centre for Lifelong Learning.

Some 80 job losses are being planned at Leeds University. At UCU Queen’s University Belfast up to 333 academic posts are at risk. Strathclyde University has announced plans to shed 140 jobs, while 65 are to be made redundant at the University of Surrey. Reading University is to close its School of Health and Social Care from September 2011. Last month the University of Sheffield announced that all 6,000 of its staff have been offered voluntary redundancy.

The role of the University and College Union (UCU) has been to systematically demobilise opposition. Despite the thousands of job losses and cuts being imposed at virtually every major institution throughout the UK, there has been no national campaign of industrial action organised by the union, or any struggle developed against the policies of the Labour government in slashing education funding and provision. Neither has there been any attempt to mobilise solidarity with students.

To the extent that the UCU has organised any action, this has been confined to a series of isolated and unconnected protests and strikes at universities and

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colleges up and down the country.

A clear example of the role of the union in heading off struggles was the recent planned strike at London Metropolitan University (LMU), scheduled for July 2. The action was called to oppose the announcement of up to 550 job losses.

Also set to strike were 1,000 members of the public sector trade union Unison, many of whose members face the sack.

On the evening prior to the proposed action, Unison called off the strike, citing a threat from management that the strike may not be legal as they were not properly notified, even though a spokeswoman for Unison said, “We contacted them correctly”.

Despite Unison’s declaration, it still proceeded to call off the planned stoppage.

The UCU then proceeded to call off its own strike, utilising the bizarre formulation that it was doing so “in solidarity” with Unison.

Cliff Snaith, UCU London Regional secretary declared, “I don’t think calling off the strike is a sign of weakness.... Any single action would be far less effective”.

The UCU is on record that it is not opposed to redundancies being carried out as long as they are voluntary. It has worked closely with college and universities to ensure that such cuts have been carried through. Following the University of Sheffield’s announcement that it was seeking voluntary redundancies from all its staff, a UCU spokesman said, “We will be working with the university to ensure that there is no need for any compulsory redundancies and advising staff as to their options with the voluntary severance scheme”.

A critical role in the union bureaucracy being able to demobilise opposition is being played by the UCU Left, an organisation within the UCU comprised of members of various left groups in Britain. The UCU Left is politically dominated by the Socialist Workers Party.

In 2007, the UCU Left won 30 of the 68 seats to the national executive committee (NEC). One of their candidates, Sasha Callaghan, won the vice-presidency of the union and is now president of the union.

In the 2008 elections, 15 UCU Left members were elected to the NEC. A statement from the UCU Left last year said, “They complement our existing NEC members whose current terms of office continue until May 2009, as well as those of our two elected members on the UCU Scottish Executive. This is a significant endorsement in that it means our supporters represent almost half of all the NEC positions available”.

The Left have nevertheless advanced no strategy to oppose cuts or in any way distinguished itself from the rest of the bureaucracy. On May 9, the SWP gave over space in its newspaper to UCU General Secretary Sally Hunt, when the UCU announced that it was to ballot its members for strike action over the job losses. Within days the union’s Higher Education Committee (HEC) called off the strike ballot on the basis that several universities were threatening legal action regarding the legality of the ballot.

On May 23, the SWP responded with the meek statement that lecturers will be “disappointed to hear that the Higher Education Committee (HEC) [on which its own members sit] has suspended their ballot for industrial action to defend jobs”.

It then added, “The suspension of the ballot is a setback. But it is clear that job cuts and attacks on workers’ pay and conditions, in education and beyond, are not going away. These attacks will be best fought with a strong, well-organised campaign on a national level”.

Despite the weasel words in favour of a “national campaign” to defend jobs, there has been no attempt by the UCU Left to propose, let alone initiate such a struggle.

The UCU Left Web site’s main statement, “Fight to Defend Jobs and Conditions”, merely supports a “Fight for the Right to Work Conference” held on June 13 (almost a month ago) and a “demonstration, called by UCU and other trade unions, outside the Labour Party conference on 27th September”.

The new university term will already be under way when this lobby of Labour’s overwhelmingly right-wing delegates takes place. And the cuts in staff will have been made *prior* to the beginning of the academic year.

The author also recommends:

Britain: University lecturers take strike action
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