

London and Manchester: Striking college workers speak out

Our reporters
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At Tower Hamlets College in London, around 120 staff and students took strike action and demonstrated on July 3 to oppose cuts being imposed by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The action was called by the University and College Union (UCU).

The cuts will have a disastrous impact on educational provision in the Tower Hamlets area. Places for students who wish to learn key skills in subjects such as English and math will be cut from 2,944 places to 1,349 in 2009-2010.

The cuts were announced with just 30 days notice at the end of the academic year. Under the proposals, 25 full-time posts are to be lost. The number of student places available on the Skills for Life programme is being cut by over 50 percent. More than half of the current English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes face closure.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several of those attending the rally.

Lamia Graham, an ESOL teacher at Tower Hamlets College, said, “We are here because we have been shocked and dismayed at the plans to cut adult provision at Tower Hamlets College. The worst hit is the ESOL department, which is going to impact a lot on the area. As you can see, a lot of students are showing their support today.

“I’m just saying no, because I believe there are alternatives, other measures that senior management can take not to make these drastic cuts. It will affect jobs as well, and in these economic times that is the last thing we need. So we’re making ourselves heard, we’re standing for our rights, and for the students.

“They only left us with a 30-day ‘consultation’

period—at the end of the year. We had to rally people really quickly on a local level, because it affects the community directly here. Today is a national day of strike, that’s why we chose today.

“I think we’ve done everything in our power.

“The students wrote to their local MPs and to the principal. They got answers from the MPs, but not from the principal. Not even a recognition that, ‘I have received your letter.’ Students have been really supportive.”

A maths lecturer at the college told the WSWs, “I’m here to join my community, this community particularly. English is not their first language ... they really need to have somebody to put them on the path. Unless they learn English they will not be able to get any jobs or anything like that.

“Funding has gone down, that’s what we have been told. This is the reason for the cuts.

“The local community has supported the strike, and I think the other unions. Unison is joining us, the teachers union is also with us. It’s gaining momentum and other people are joining.”

Manchester

Several hundred staff at Manchester College in the northwest of England took strike action last Wednesday to protest the planned redundancies of 13 staff in two departments. These include maths and science teachers and English as a Second Language staff.

Workers were also protesting the loss of 29 jobs at the child crèche facility at the city’s Northenden campus. The lecturers, members of the UCU, were

supported by dozens of students from various campuses.

The job losses are being implemented after a review by college management concluded that the departments were overcrowded. The college has 80,000 students at 25 sites around the city and is the largest in Britain. It was formed last year from the merger of the MANCAT and City College Manchester.

Striking staff and students marched from Manchester College's Openshaw and Shena Simon campuses to the Town Hall. Also supporting the march were members of the public sector trade union Unison. Following the demonstration, a rally was held at the nearby Mechanics Institute.

Paula is employed at the Openshaw campus in the Early Years department. She said, "I think it was a good turnout once we got to Shena Simon College. There were a lot more people there. There are more than 13 redundancies, they are saying. They've shut a nursery with 29 staff in. That comes under Unison, but that is still of interest to us. I think nine ESOL members of staff are going and three-and-a-half maths staff and three-and-a-half biology staff, so it's more than what they have said.

"They promised no redundancies last year and then the principal sent out an email saying there would be a small number of redundancies. Forty plus isn't a small number, is it? They might think it's a small number, but we don't.

"I think Labour is putting money into different things now, aren't they, like wars and buying banks? You know, they can spend it on stupid things, things that people with a moral conscience don't really agree with. There is money for wars, but not for the workers who pay in.

"They are doing this now, saying there is no money, especially at a time when the students need it. I think that's why a lot of students have come out in support today. There are about 35 or 40 here, which is quite good, really.

"What I'd really like to see is for more staff to come out, particularly at the ex-MANCAT sites."

A member of Unison at the rally said he had been at his union conference the previous week and that workers had discussed uniting their action with the

UCU. Referring to the increasing attacks on public education provision, he said, "The bus had been under way for some time now and it was time we got moving. The economic crisis is not our fault and yet we are the ones who are paying for it."



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