

Britain: University lecturers take strike action

Robert Stevens
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Members of the University and College Union (UCU) are involved in a series of disputes around the country to oppose job losses, pay reductions and cuts in education services.

On July 1, UCU members at Manchester College in the northwest of England are to strike following a ballot showing 74 percent in favour of industrial action. Manchester College, established last year as a “super college” from the merger of MANCAT and City College Manchester, is planning to implement a number of job cuts. The college has 80,000 students and is now the largest further education centre in Britain and one of the biggest in Europe.

At the time of the merger, less than a year ago, the college promised staff that no redundancies would follow. Six workers are to be made redundant in the math and biology departments and seven in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Alongside the redundancies, several courses are to close, including basic level ESOL classes.

Other cuts include the elimination of childcare facilities at the city’s Northenden campus. The facility caters to about 50 children per day.

On July 2, UCU members at London Metropolitan University will strike as part of an ongoing campaign to prevent the loss of hundreds of jobs. The university has announced a total of 330 redundancies to be imposed by July 2010. With 34,000 students, LMU is the largest university in the capital. The latest walkout follows a strike in May. On May 11, students supported their lecturers at LMU and organised an occupation of the campus’s Commercial Road site to protest the planned redundancies.

Following inaccurate reporting of the number of students completing courses, LMU has seen its funding slashed by £15 million a year. The university has had to repay £36.5 million to the Higher Education Funding

Council for England for the previous years’ over-funding.

According to the UCU, LMU’s response to this shortfall “was to announce plans to axe at least 550 posts, which equates to 800 staff actually at risk (one quarter of the workforce).”

On July 3, staff at Tower Hamlets College in London will also strike. The stoppage is part of an ongoing struggle by lecturers to oppose job losses and cuts in adult education courses. Tower Hamlets College serves a population which is among the most deprived in the UK. The college is planning to shed 25 full-time posts and cut student places on its Skills for Life programme by more than 50 percent. Further cuts include the closure of outreach centres and support services for students and learners.

Some 1.4 million adult education places have been lost nationwide over the last three years as a result of course eliminations. Cuts being imposed on the college by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) will have a disastrous impact on educational provision in the Tower Hamlets area. The LSC cuts will see places for students who wish to learn key skills in subjects such as English and math cut from 2,944 places to 1,349 in 2009-2010.

A strike is also planned by staff at Gorseinon College in Swansea, Wales on July 8 in opposition to a proposed 10 job cut in the adult education department. The action follows a ballot in which 72.1 percent of UCU members voted in favour. Gorseinon College said that the job losses were necessary as a result of an 8 percent cut in its funding from the Welsh Assembly government and no funding from the European Social Fund.

The planned stoppage at Gorseinon follows a protest held by some 300 lecturers and students in April at the Welsh Assembly. Cutbacks have had a severe impact on the provision of basic education for adults. At

Cardiff University plans have been announced that will end all arts and humanities courses for adults.

Other protests have been held at the Canolfan Y Bont lifelong learning centre in Pontarddulais, near Swansea. The centre, owned by Gorseinon College, is slated to close.

Industrial action could also be held at the University of Westminster, as it has failed to honour an agreement to pay three years of back salaries owed to staff. The UCU said this month that the university was the only UK institution that “has failed to deliver a clear agreement on back pay when implementing a pay agreement thrashed out in 2006.”

The University of Westminster has instead decided to impose a new pay deal, known as the Framework Agreement. The UCU has called on its members not to sign the new agreement. The university recently implemented job losses in the computing and ceramics departments and plans to carry out further redundancies in its integrated health department.

Further job losses are planned at Thames Valley University. Following the slashing of 90 jobs nine months ago, more than 7 full-time posts are to be shed at its Faculty of the Arts. The university is based at campuses in Slough, Reading in Berkshire, and Ealing in west London, with more than 47,000 students.

Other strikes and protests have been held at Leeds College of Art and Design and by staff and students at Barnsley College. On June 10, lecturers at Leeds College of Art and Design struck to demand the college honour a 2003-2004 pay deal. The dispute stems from a two-year national agreement that was finalised in 2003-2004 and was supposedly aimed at achieving pay parity for college lecturers with schoolteachers. Due to the refusal of the college to settle with staff over what is owed from the 2003-2004 agreement, it is estimated that lecturers earn around £6,000 per annum less than they would elsewhere.

About 60 lecturers set up picket lines outside the college’s two main sites on Blenheim Walk and Vernon Street from 8am, with classes forced to close. Also supporting the staff were UCU members from Leeds University, Barnsley College, Bradford College and Thomas Danby & Leeds College of Technology.

On June 20, UCU members and students at Barnsley College as well as protesters from nearby Doncaster staged a demonstration in the town centre. The protest

was held in opposition to management plans 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 positions previously held by trained lecturers.

Whilst it is clear that lecturers, academics and staff are willing to undertake a resolute struggle to defend jobs, pay and the provision of basic further education, these strikes and protests are being carried out on a local and ad hoc basis. The UCU has mounted no national campaign to mobilise its entire membership of around 116,000 and to call on the support of all staff and students at colleges throughout the UK.

In a number of cases the union has stated that although it is opposed to compulsory redundancies, it is more than willing to negotiate with further education institutions carrying out “voluntary” redundancies.

A June 25 press release from the UCU announcing the upcoming industrial action at London Metropolitan University stated, “UCU today repeated its call for London Met to come clean about why it was announcing 226 compulsory redundancies when people had been rejected for the voluntary redundancy scheme.”

The statement continued, “In total, the university has announced 330 redundancies by July 2010. It has approved just 113 applications for voluntary redundancy (equivalent to 104 posts), leaving 226 posts facing the axe. The union said it knows more than 113 people applied for voluntary redundancy and is demanding to know why staff happy to leave had been rejected, leaving others to face the sack.”

Such a policy of championing “voluntary” redundancies can only serve to divide staff and weaken any united struggle in defence of jobs, pay and further education provision.



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