

Britain: Thousands of jobs threatened in higher and further education

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Thousands of job cuts are being implemented at higher and further education institutions throughout the UK. Many departments are also being slashed or closed. This onslaught is the result of funding shortfalls due to central government budget cuts. Many universities imposing the cuts are already millions of pounds in debt.

In June, the University College Union (UCU) compiled a list of almost 6,000 threatened job losses nationally. Then, 45 universities were attempting to impose job cuts and a further 99 planned to implement jobs cuts soon. The survey also found that 55 colleges were also in the process of cutting jobs.

More than a third of job cuts are being carried out in London, with over 2,000 threatened. Nearly 1,000 were at risk in Yorkshire and Humberside, with institutions in both the West Midlands and Northern Ireland seeking to cut more than 400 jobs. In Wales nearly 400 jobs are under threat.

In the past three months, the number of jobs threatened has risen by more than 315. In 19 of the nearly 140 institutions listed, many of the cuts have already been implemented with the full agreement of the UCU—which has opposed only compulsory redundancies.

There are examples of how the UCU is assisting in imposing cuts listed on its own “List of jobs at risk/being cut” web page.

Of Gorseinon College in Wales, the union states, “10 jobs being cut in adult education. UCU members voted for strike action, to be taken on 8 July but with the reopening of negotiations, have suspended their action. All will now be voluntary.”

On job losses at Coleg Gwent Further Education College, it continues, “22 lecturers as part of 74 losses. All voluntary.”

Its City College Birmingham entry states, “Agreement has now been reached that there will be no compulsory redundancies at the College and on this basis, there will be no further strike action.”

For Pembrokeshire College, the list contemptuously simply reads, “20 jobs cut. All VRs” [Voluntary Redundancies].

Some of the largest cuts have been made at the University of Sheffield. Last term, the university asked for a number of its 6,000 workforce to take voluntary redundancy. On August 17, the university announced that 320 workers are being made voluntarily redundant.

The UCU has called token industrial action only when it has been impossible to control the anger and opposition locally to threatened job losses.

Cuts at the London Metropolitan University (LMU) involve the loss of more than 550 posts, fully 25 percent of the workforce. The university has been hit by repayment demands from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) of more than £36.5 million.

Such cuts will have a devastating impact on higher education provision for students in London. London Metropolitan serves more than 34,000 students, many social disadvantaged, and is the largest university in the capital.

The UCU called a two-day strike at London Metropolitan, held on October 15 and 16. Once again, no other UCU members, even those in neighbouring London universities and colleges affected by cuts, were mobilised by the union.

Instead, a boycott campaign has been launched that merely calls on other academics not to participate in conferences organised by the LMU, not to apply for jobs or lecture there, and not to participate in external marking of exams.

All such limited local initiatives are collectively the means by which the UCU is seeking to oppose a unified struggle by all its 120,000 members nationally. Instead of a campaign to defend all jobs, the union is in reality managing job losses at all the institutions where reductions are being enforced.

The cuts are an integral part of the government's assault on public education in Britain. Facing an unprecedented public finance deficit as a result of the nearly £1 trillion cost of the bailout of the UK's financial institutions during the last year, the Labour government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown is slashing public spending.

This year, central government told universities to cut costs by £180 million by 2011. Fully 30,000 students who applied to go to university failed to secure a place this academic year. More than 600,000 people applied for a place this year, a 10 percent increase on 2008. But government funding only supports 13,000 extra places, of which 10,000 are in maths, science and engineering.

Despite this open policy of government-led cuts, the unions are presenting the onslaught on jobs as the brainchild of a few hard-headed and recalcitrant vice chancellors and principals.

The UCU recently issued a joint statement with four other trade unions with members in higher education—Unison, Unite, and GMB EIS, as well as the National Union of Students. The statement does not even mention the Labour government.

Rejecting any struggle against job cuts, the statement concludes instead, “We therefore believe that a *partnership between unions and employers* to reach a national agreement on job security is essential if we are to defend education” (emphasis added).

The politically criminal role played by the UCU is only underscored by the announcement at its September conference for a national ballot for industrial action of its Further Education membership. The announcement followed the conference decision to reject a 1.5 percent pay offer from the main colleges' employer, the Association of Colleges (AoC). According to the UCU, the industrial action “would be an escalating programme of strikes starting with one day and moving to two and three days actions in subsequent weeks.” While proposing such a limited campaign on this latest pay offer, it should be noted that last month lecturers at five colleges, in Doncaster, Rotherham, Leeds, London

and Suffolk, struck because a previous pay recommendation has still not been implemented—costing some up to £4,500.

There is, of course, no mention of combining opposition to de facto pay cuts with the defence of jobs, let alone of uniting the struggles of its college membership with those thousands of its members facing the same attacks in universities nationwide.

The defence of education requires the mobilisation of the entire working class in a political movement that unites those employed in schools, colleges and universities with students and broader layers of the working class. Such an offensive demands a political break with the UCU apparatus by the rank and file and the building of a new party to take forward the fight against the Labour government's cuts agenda based on a socialist programme for the reorganisation of society in the interests of working people.



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