

Youth services slashed in South Yorkshire

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Sheffield City Council in South Yorkshire, England, last month announced £6.5 million in budget cuts, half of which will fall on young people's services. Council workers face pay freezes, more unpaid holidays and less redundancy pay. This is just a prelude to £219 million in cuts planned for the next four years by the Liberal Democrat-controlled town hall.

Labour councillors offered no opposition, while the Green Party only suggested some slight rearrangements so the cuts fall on different services.

Sheffield Futures, a charity that provides youth workers and runs the Connexions careers service, has had its council funding cut by £1.5 million, a quarter of its budget. Ninety-five of its 368 staff in Sheffield will lose their jobs, following a loss of 60 jobs in 2004, and pay will be lowered. It is also unclear whether the service's contract will be renewed next March.

On August 3, Unison, the union representing the Sheffield Futures staff, called a meeting to discuss the cuts. But instead of initiating fighting measures in opposition to the reductions at both a local and national level, all the union proposed was to put pressure on politicians so they "think twice" before gutting the welfare state.

Despite this, workers at the meeting voted unanimously to ballot for strike action. But their willingness to fight is being sabotaged and undermined by the union, which regards such action as a "last resort", and a means of pressuring for a more "acceptable" level of cuts. In this vein, workers were encouraged to write to city councillors, protest outside the town hall and contact local media outlets.

In principle, Unison accepts that cuts are needed, and announced it will now enter a month of consultation with management to discuss the possible restructuring of the service, including accepting as many voluntary redundancies as possible.

Sheffield Futures workers have warned of the impact

the cuts will have on the youth. "What makes me so angry is they forget that so many cuts are going to affect young people; this government doesn't actually have a youth policy", one worker said. "Why do the cuts to young people's services have to be so hard?"

A Youth Worker said, "We're invaluable, because we're the only ones able to communicate with young people".

Workers speaking at the meeting expressed anger that there had not been any consultation over the cuts and at being given just one month's notice of the mass sackings. They contrasted their own treatment with the lavish salaries paid to those responsible in the council for organising the procurement from the private sector.

The union is trying to isolate workers in Sheffield, although workers up and down the country now face similar attacks.

The cuts in youth services will come into effect just as 16 to 18-year-olds receive their GCSE and A-Levels results. Thousands of young people now face taking difficult career decisions without proper advice. With a widespread shortage of university places—200,000 students are expected to be denied courses this year—and with over one million young people currently unemployed, their prospects are increasingly bleak.

Connexions is to be pared back to the bone nationwide, with a loss of 8,000 jobs and any remaining services to be moved online. This includes cuts of 25 to 40 percent in Doncaster, Norwich, Northumberland, Sutton, Cheshire and Bolton.

There are no plans for a replacement careers service. Institute of Career Guidance President Dr Deirdre Hughes pointed out this week in the *Guardian* that the government "cannot yet articulate its vision for an all-age careers service, as included in the Conservative Manifesto". She expressed the widespread concern that responsibility for career advice would be pushed onto teachers, who are not trained for this role.

Many other young people's services will close across South Yorkshire this year.

A £700,000 reduction in funding to Sheffield College will shut down community centres and nurseries across the city, affecting 1,370 students. Doncaster's Children's Services Department (CSD) faces a £726,000 budget cut. This cut is being imposed despite the CSD being in desperate need of funds and having already been given a £1.29 million central government grant in June "to support management and staff in the delivery of what is a major and complex improvement programme".

The 100,000 young people in Britain who are not in employment, education or training, often the poorest and most deprived sections of society, will be hardest hit by the cuts.

These cuts in services to young people are part of a massive nationwide programme of austerity measures that will see the destruction of remaining welfare provisions won through a century-and-a-half of bitter working class struggle.

Unison has already signalled its agreement in principle to further austerity measures; it only asks to be included in their implementation. In Unison's proposed "alternative" budget, which states "deficits will need to be closed", the union offers their support in "involving" public sector staff in cutbacks.



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