

SEP candidate visits picket line at Sheffield College, Hillsborough

Striking lecturer: “You don’t feel valued, you just feel like a number”

Our reporters
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Teaching staff at Sheffield College took strike action on Wednesday against threats to eliminate 120 posts.

Socialist Equality Party candidate Simon Walker visited the picket line at the college’s Hillsborough site, close to the Walkley ward where he is standing in the local council elections. He spoke to striking members of the University and College Union (UCU) about their dispute and the policies and programme of the Socialist Equality Party.

Mark Crapper, a lecturer in biology and UCU branch secretary at Hillsborough, said, “Our strike today is against what management are calling a ‘reshaping’, which in effect means a cut of about 120 posts at the college. Some 60 of these would affect lecturing posts, and the rest would be Unison members, technicians, admin and other staff. Since many posts are filled on a part-time basis, up to 200 staff could be affected.”

Julie Carr, a lecturer in Art & Design, said, “I’ve been employed at Sheffield for 27 years, and now work as a part-time lecturer. When I first started, there were over 100 lecturers employed in Art & Design alone, but staff numbers have got less and less. The old managers were more approachable and had been used to teaching themselves. Now the college has become much more like a business than an education institution. You don’t feel valued like you used to, you just feel like a number. Management don’t really know how hard we work.”

The strike at Sheffield College follows recent national action taken by lecturers at universities and colleges against moves to ramp up pension contributions and raise the retirement age from 60 to

65. For college lecturers on the top of their pay scale, the additional contributions could cost at least £88 a month, according to one of the pickets.

The job cuts are part of moves by college management to make savings totalling £4 million at what is Europe’s largest further education college, offering a variety of courses to some 17,000 full- and part-time students. The cut in teaching staff will mean some classes being scaled back or folding altogether and a higher teacher-student ratio on other courses.

Already adult education facilities in many Sheffield neighbourhoods are being closed, with some classes relocated to the city centre. Courses hardest hit include the teaching of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), and basic literacy and numeracy skills for adults. Classes will no longer be available in several deprived areas of the city with large immigrant communities, such as Darnall, Tinsley and Burngreave.

This will affect up to 1,000 people who will now have to travel into the city centre and face much larger class sizes. Moreover, courses that were previously provided at no cost to the learner could now incur a charge, raising another obstacle to those seeking to improve their English or learning to read and write. Thirteen lecturer posts on these locally delivered courses are at risk.

Sheffield College is not the only further and higher education institution in Yorkshire that is facing massive cuts and job losses. Teaching staff at Barnsley College have received letters calling for voluntary redundancies, and at Leeds College 260 jobs are at risk. In neighbouring Rotherham, 70 jobs are at risk at

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology, which faces a £2.5 million deficit.

Rank-and-file UCU members are clearly willing to fight to defend their pay and conditions, voting by over 80 percent for action at Sheffield College. At a regional and national level the union is sitting on a powder keg, with strikes or strike votes being held at colleges and universities all over the UK in the last three months in response to threats to jobs, including at Liverpool Hope University, Heriot-Watt University, University of the West of England, Newcastle College, University of Stirling, Salford University, South Tyneside College and Belfast Metropolitan College.

While staff report rising workloads, the size of the workforce in further education colleges is shrinking, according to the “staff individualised record data” collected by Lifelong Learning UK, which provides a snapshot of the number of individual contracts in the sector. The 247,859 total in 2009-10 is down 7.6 percent over the previous year.

Simon Walker said, “Rather than unite these disparate struggles at colleges and universities up and down the country—college and university lecturers, support and ancillary staff and students—the UCU allows each local strike to take place in isolation, inevitably weakening the effect of any action.”

For the unions, Simon continued, “it is not about stopping the cuts, but managing them, so things don’t get out of their control and the union bureaucracy maintains its seat at the negotiating table, while union members still lose their jobs and face worsening conditions.”

“As part of our election platform, the Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union apparatus, in every workplace and community. They must be at the centre of an independent movement of the working class to bring down the coalition government and replace it with a workers’ government committed to socialist policies.”



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