

Massive cuts at universities in the UK

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As part of cuts being made to higher education nationally, two universities in the North West of England are imposing attacks detrimental to the terms and conditions of thousands of workers and thousands of students.

The University of Liverpool has demanded that 2,803 non-academic staff accept inferior working conditions or face dismissal. The University of Salford is imposing its 13th round of job cuts in two years, and closing down entire departments.

This offensive against workers' conditions is part of a broader trend of mass job losses across the UK education system, due to massive budget cuts in recent years. Overall, the government forecasts 900,000 public sector jobs will be destroyed between 2010 and 2018 due to budget cuts. A further 300,000 jobs may be lost by 2018 due to further budget shortfalls, according to a study by the Institute of Fiscal Studies.

In Liverpool, all hourly paid staff (every employee except academics) are being forced to reapply for their jobs with worse terms and conditions. In June university management issued notices for dismissal (section 188) to staff, requiring they work longer hours, without overtime pay, and on weekends and bank holidays without compensation.

A section 188 gives workers just 45 days to comply with new terms and conditions or be sacked. This is an unprecedented scenario in the higher education sector and is the first time that an educational institution is using new changes in national employment law to impose worse conditions. Prior to this management had to consult over contractual changes over a 90-day period. The changes came into law in April for firms considering laying off 100 or more staff.

The latest round of cuts at the University of Salford threatens 46 workers with compulsory redundancy, with a further 49 jobs at risk over the next four years. A leaked memo also revealed the university's plans to

shut down several entire departments, including humanities, languages, social sciences, arts and media. The law school will be phased out, with some courses transferred to the business school. The cuts follow over 150 job losses in previous years, including 218 in 2011.

The cuts are part of a reduction in the university's size following a drop in revenue after student numbers fell by 440, due to the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees.

Revenues also fell after full-time undergraduate applications at the University of Liverpool dropped by 10 percent following the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees. Both Manchester Metropolitan and the University of Manchester have around 500 fewer students than in previous years and are facing funding cuts. The University of Bolton is similarly imposing 80 redundancies after falling student numbers caused £1 million in lost revenues, following similar redundancies last year when it lost 10 percent of its budget.

These cuts must be placed in the context of the wider strategy of the ruling elite to massively cut back the public education system and transform it into a major source of profit for the wealthy.

Their intentions were highlighted by the recent leak of proposals for the £40 billion student loans stock to be sold to private investors and the interest rate cap removed. Ministers commissioned the report by Rothschild investment bank that encouraged turning the loans into an attractive opportunity for investors.

University teaching was cut by one-fifth last academic year, losing £1.3 billion in funds. This follows the halving of teaching budgets after the introduction of tuition fees, with ministers arguing that the higher fees would make up the shortfall. The reality has been wholesale course closures and job losses.

The UK spends less on its university system than every other developed nation but Japan, despite recent budget cuts totalling two-fifths by 2015. A further £400

million was cut from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills that oversees university funding, in last week's government spending round. University spending is already facing a 40 percent cut by 2015.

How have these attacks been possible? Workers must examine the UCU's record of collaboration with government austerity measures.

During the 2010 General Election the UCU issued a political statement declaring it "fully recognises the constraints on public spending during tough economic times" and refused to mobilize the collective strength of 120,000 members in a serious struggle.

Following the one-day national strike against public sector pension cuts in 2011, the unions worked hand-in-glove with the government to impose the diktat of international finance capital. Following the strike, all the unions involved, including the UCU, made separate deals with the government, in which they imposed all their demands.

Following the issuing of section 188 notices to staff at the University of Liverpool, UCU members voted unanimously for a ballot on strike action. A previous meeting by Faculty of Health and Life Sciences workers also opposed management's attacks.

This opposition will be defeated if the struggle is left in the hands of the UCU, however.

Following the strike ballot vote UCU regional official Martyn Moss said that were strike action to proceed, it would not take place for months, until the autumn. The union was in negotiations with management for six months, from December 2012 until June, under conditions in which management had threatened at the outset to issue section 188 notices. Rather than oppose this outright, the union continued to negotiate, allowing management to carry out its plan to the letter.

The UCU named Salford as, "Britain's most prolific university for axing staff", stating "this represents a fourth year of pay cuts. Staff costs fell again in 2012 and [institution] reserves are strong." That such cuts could be imposed out at this single university is an implicit acknowledgement of the role the UCU has played there, and nationally, in collaborating with management in overseeing the imposition of numerous job losses and heavier workloads.

Throughout the UK, the UCU is attempting to dissipate the anger of education workers facing the sack. Opposed to any serious offensive against

management, where it is unable to prevent the outbreak of strikes the union is limiting whatever struggles emerge to token, harmless one-day strikes.

Over 70 staff picketed Kirklees College in West Yorkshire in May in a dispute over job losses and large pay cuts. One-day strikes have also taken place in Chesterfield to protest 70 redundancies, following 100 job losses in two years. UCU members in Grimsby voted overwhelmingly for industrial action to counter the loss of one in five teaching jobs and inferior working conditions, with the union sanctioning only a one-day strike.

Pseudo-left groups who comprise the "UCU Left" caucus of the UCU bureaucracy, such as the Socialist Workers Party, play a critical role in facilitating management's attacks on education workers. UCU Left member Liz Lawrence is the union's vice president. Six other SWP members are also UCU national executive committee members. They play a critical role in ensuring the suffocating stranglehold of the union over each and every struggle that emerges.

Among UCU members, anger is mounting against attacks by management, as expressed in many unanimous or near unanimous votes for strikes. Speaking to the SWP's *Socialist Worker* in March, in the face of this opposition, Lawrence commented, "It's a mistake to see members as all keen to take action and a wicked, evil bureaucracy holding them back". Glossing over the active collaboration of the UCU in imposing cuts, she added that the main problem was that the bureaucracy had no faith that a struggle could be waged, due to a passive membership. "There is a problem, however, if union leaderships lose confidence in the ability of members to fight," Lawrence stated.



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