

Open University staff in Britain protest regional centre closures

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The Open University (OU) is set to close seven of its regional centres in England. The centres set to shut are in Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Gateshead, Leeds, London and Oxford.

Only the Manchester, Nottingham and Milton Keynes OU centres will remain open. More than 500 people will lose their jobs.

The OU, a public distance learning and research university, is the largest academic institution in the UK and Europe by student number, with more than 250,000 students enrolled, including more than 50,000 studying overseas.

On November 25, for the first time in its history, staff at the OU centres across Britain went on strike—staging a day’s walkout at 12 centres in protest.

The OU cynically claims that these changes will benefit students because the three remaining centres will stay open for longer hours. Staff at the OU have argued that these changes will see the more vulnerable students failing their courses and discontinuing their higher education.

The regional centres provide face-to-face support for students, including those with mental, emotional and physical disabilities.

Despite a university senate vote to reject the proposals, the OU announced that it would press ahead with its plans.

These cuts are part of a wider attack on Higher Education (HE). Along with major cuts to the OU, a new financial analysis revealed that as much as £1.6 billion could be wiped from the college education budget. This could mean the closure of one-third of all further education colleges and half of the country’s sixth forms dealing with students age 16-18. Some education departments were asked to predict the impact of a 25-40 percent budget cut. The adult skills budget

has already experienced a 14.9 percent cut this year alone.

The OU is a renowned institution and cherished by the general population. The attacks it faces are bound up with the erosion of all the major postwar gains of the working class.

First established in 1969 by the Labour government of Harold Wilson, the OU’s purpose was to make higher education accessible to everyone regardless of their background, incomes and location. In 1971, when the OU accepted its first students, 25,000 people enrolled and 20,000 registered on a course. This was in a period when the total student population in the UK was only 130,000.

OU courses were made available in prisons from 1970 and as of 2011 it was the biggest provider of HE courses to prisoners. Its overseas offices made HE available to students in Canada, Venezuela, Nigeria and India, to name only some countries.

Since its founding, more than 1.5 million students have studied with the institution.

From the very beginning, the OU came under attack. Discussing the OU in 1970, the Conservative junior minister for education, William van Straubenzee, declared, “I would have slit its throat if I could.”

The hostility of the ruling class towards an institute that benefitted so many never went away.

In 1973, the OU experienced a shortage in resources and was unable to expand its reach. Under Wilson’s governments and Tory governments, the financial situation of the OU remained precarious.

Under the 1980s Tory government of Margaret Thatcher, as the OU’s review of its history notes, “Financial assistance was reduced to the extent that for the first time the OU was unable to offer assistance to a number of new students, however low their income.

The post-foundation student to tutor ratio rose from its usual 20 to 1 to 25 to 1. In 1984 the undergraduate intake was reduced by 5,000 (20 percent) and five new courses postponed for a year.”

The OU’s position remained insecure into the 1990s, with its financial backing again coming under assault following the 2008 global financial crisis and the bailout of the UK’s financial institutions.

In 2008, the Labour government removed £100 million of funding from students studying for a second degree. These students are known as Equivalent or Lower level Qualification students. The higher education institutions hardest hit were the Open University and Birkbeck College.

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More recently, the OU has introduced tuition fees because of the attacks on its funding. From September 2012, the price of a full-time degree rose from an average of about £1,400 to an average of £5,000 a year; a bigger relative increase than at non-distance learning universities.

In an online petition, OU staff voiced their opposition, stating: “We the undersigned express our deep concern about the UK government’s policy of making damaging cuts in higher education funding which have led to massive increases in student fees, including a trebling of Open University fees.”

In response, the government stated that the attacks were part of “rebalancing the costs of Higher Education ... more equitably between the student and the state” and would “also help in our drive to tackle the fiscal deficit.” It added, “We have shifted public spending away from teaching grants and towards repayable tuition fee loans which can be paid up front to institutions on behalf of students.”

On their web site the University and College Union (UCU) was at pains to state that a strike is the very last resort. Pauline Collins, UCU branch president at the OU, commented, “Nobody wants to take strike action, but we have now been left with no alternative. The university needs to listen to our concerns and abandon these damaging proposals.”

The UCU expressed disagreement more with the manner in which the plans have been laid out, rather than the cuts themselves, commenting, “It would be a devastating blow to lose so much expertise and has

questioned *why so many centres are being hit at the same time*” (emphasis added).

Rather than mobilise its 116,000 members to mount a genuine defence of the OU and further and higher education as a whole, the UCU is attempting to dissipate anger at the closures by setting a timetable of day walkouts for each OU centre, spread out over the first few weeks of December.

During the 2010 General Election, the UCU issued a political statement declaring that it “fully recognises the constraints on public spending during tough economic times” and refused to mobilize the collective strength of its 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 diktats of big business. Following the strike, all the unions involved, including the UCU, made separate deals with the government, in which they imposed all its demands.

No student union body has come to the defence of the OU. The National Union Students (NUS) long ago abandoned any struggle to defend higher education.



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