

Manchester Metropolitan University staff oppose site closure, redundancies

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1 July 2017

Around 800 teaching staff at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) are protesting the closure of its nearby campus in Crewe, Cheshire. University bosses plan to shut the Crewe campus in August 2019, threatening 370 jobs including 160 teaching jobs, on the grounds that it is “no longer academically or financially sustainable.”

By the end of August, up to 16 academics will be out of a job, in music, philosophy, theatre, sport, business and sociology.

The University and College Union (UCU) is appealing to management to accept voluntary redundancies, bemoaning that the university has “rejected” its request to postpone redundancies, carry out further talks and involve the governments’ Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service.

MMU is the fifth largest university in the UK with an enrolment of 32,485 students. Among its many faculties is the famous Manchester School of Art. Its Chancellor is leading Blairite and supporter of privatisation Peter Mandelson, who now sits in the House of Lords.

The University employs 4,400 staff, comprising almost 1,500 full-time teaching staff, 700 part-time teaching staff and 2,200 support staff. Half of the teaching staff, however, are on zero hours contracts. Under these contracts workers have no guaranteed hours of employment, with management able to call on them to work whenever they see fit.

The campus has already lost very experienced staff. A member of staff from the Crewe campus told the *Guardian*, “People are suffering from stress, anxiety and depression. People who haven’t had a day off in 20 years, now they’re taking two, three, four days off because they can’t really cope.”

Job losses beyond the Crewe campus are threatened

as every faculty at MMU has been asked to submit cost saving proposals.

On June 21 MMU staff struck for 48 hours. While the MMU complained that the strike took place on Open Day for students, about 20 picketing lecturers appealed to students for support, with many stopping to sign a petition opposing the closure.

Strikers addressed passing students with the following questions: “How many of my lecturers are on zero hours contracts? How secure are my lecturers’ jobs? How will my fees be spent? Do you know the university is reshaping education to what the market wants?”

One lecturer, Caroline, told the WSWS that management “were relying on people in Manchester thinking that this doesn’t really affect them, it’s in Crewe. The Crewe students are completing their degrees with a skeleton staff... everyone is horribly demoralised... they are not necessarily equipped to teach very specialised subject areas.”

Maria, part of the academic staff at MMU for many years, lamented the deteriorating conditions due to pro-market ethos promoted by university management.

“I was brought into the education sector as I believe education is not a money making business nor is it a privilege—it is a human right,” Maria explained. “Over the years,” she continued, “I have seen many changes in education due to legislative changes and neo-liberal economics. This university has had a shift in its sense of purpose, we are no longer educational providers we are simply here to compete with other educational institutions in what is an educational free market.”

Maria explained about the business ventures the MMU has engaged in. “We had another campus in Cheshire. This was sold off about five or six years ago, as land is very valuable in south Cheshire and now

Crewe is being sold off. Crewe always did a lot of outreach work with local people returning to education to skill up and return to work. This opportunity has now gone.”

Condemning the National Student Survey—launched under the Blair Labour government in 2005 to supposedly measure student satisfaction—Maria said, “education shouldn’t be about satisfying people, it should be about disquieting them, disturbing them, making them angry, making them political. It’s not about whether they have a shower in the gym or how good the buildings look... There was a campaign here once where the students were encouraged to text the institution if their lecturers were late for a class!”

Speaking about the National Union of Students branch at the MMU, Marie said, “It is hand in glove with management. They sit on various university committees and in a totally neo-liberal way they see it as a step up on some kind of managerial career ladder.” In contrast, she believed that students as a whole were part of a “rising tide of change” and that “there is no longer that sense of defeat that my generation, the Thatcher generation, suffered and have internalised.”

John, a teacher with two years at MMU previously worked in higher education for 12 years. He told the WSWS he opposes the “marketisation” of education that has informed Labour and Conservative education policy for the past two decades.

“The university is narrowing down the range of courses on offer,” he explained, “Education has ended up as a commodity, not as a technique of critically viewing the world.”

Mark added, “any course that looks at social inequality or justice is under threat... my course in Youth and Community Work was shut down two months ago by the university—no consultation with staff—they don’t listen to the staff who offer intellectual capital.”

The UCU claims that it is possible to marry the needs of education with the needs of the capitalist market. The union’s leaflet distributed during the strike days said, “The key factor in the closure is the Conservative government’s policy of introducing new universities run for profit-but that does not mean academics need to lose their jobs at MMU... The university has £378 million worth of reserves.”

The MMU is among many higher education

institutions across the country anticipating hundreds of redundancies due to the uncertainties surrounding Brexit, and competition between universities due to comparative league tables. The Conservative government is presently rolling out its “teaching excellence framework”—a bogus assessment of teaching quality leading to gold, bronze and silver ratings.

Staff at the adjacent University of Manchester, also facing job cuts, are preparing to ballot for strike action, after management announced plans to axe 171 jobs, of which 140 are academic positions in the faculties of arts, languages, biology, medicine and business. The University of Manchester is the UK’s largest single-site university, with 40,000 students and 12,000 staff. Last month, almost 200 professors at the university signed a letter of no confidence addressed to Edward Astle, chair of the university’s board of governors, declaring, “[We] and a substantial number of other academics have no confidence in senior management.”

According to *Times Higher Education*, 10 universities have announced that 572 academic posts will be eliminated between them this year. This year tuition fees are set to rise to £9,250 a year and by autumn student loans to pay for the higher fees will be subject to an increase in interest rates —rising from 4.6 percent to 6.1 percent—impacting on the numbers applying for university.

Universities in Wales are suffering an eight percent fall in student applications as a result. 150 jobs are at risk at Aberystwyth University in Wales as the university aims to save £11 million over the next two years. The University of South Wales has announced 139 job cuts, and the University of Wales Trinity St. Davids confirmed it has sent letters to all teaching and support staff seeking voluntary redundancies.



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