

Lecturers and students stage united protests in Sheffield and Southampton

Our reporters
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Several hundred students attended a rally in support of their lecturers outside the University of Sheffield's Firth Court building on Friday, during the second day of a national strike by UK lecturers.

Robyn Orfitelli, an academic from the university's Department of Linguistics, addressed the rally. She came to Sheffield from the US four years ago:

"In those four years our pay hasn't even kept up with the rising cost of living. We make less now than we did when I moved here, and our salaries are already a fraction of what they are in other parts of Europe and in North America. I've seen your tuition fees rise and I've seen them cut the scholarships available to you, making it harder for you to have access to an education.

"This is supposed to be a research-based university and yet our classroom sizes are increasing. More and more they're pressuring us, as admissions tutors, to treat this as some kind of sausage factory.

"At the same time, the message is going out to you that your lecturers don't care, and that we're not willing to spend time with you. When really, what everyone is just trying to do is to get back to the fundamental goal of the university system: staff and students working together; doing research that teaches us more about this world and then using this to improve the education that you guys are getting."

Speaking on behalf of the University and College Union was Sam Morecroft, the union's "anti-casualisation officer," and a member of the Socialist Party. His speech urged students to back the UCU's call for negotiations and focused on attempts to sow illusions that Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party are leading a fight to roll back the attacks on education carried out by the Conservatives.

"We've had support from Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell of the Labour Party and that's fantastic,"

he said. "Just a few years ago we would have got no support from the Labour Party."

The WSWS spoke with lecturers and students at the rally. Craig Brandist has been a lecturer at the University of Sheffield for 21 years. He said, "This is all part of the marketisation process as they want to individualise pensions. That is what they want to do with students too, so instead of going to university being a collective societal good, it's being treated as a commodity. And we're being treated as people who produce a commodity that is called education."

"I believe education is the second most casualised industry after catering now. To get a job is difficult and when you are in it, the staff-student ratio is much worse than it used to be. The proportion of university expenditure on staffing has gone down from over 60 percent 10 years ago to under 50 percent now."

Mayeda has been a student at Sheffield for four years. She said, "I am striking today because my lecturers have put so much effort into my education. They deserve to get their pensions. Once I do my PhD I want to go into lecturing, so this is my future as well.

"I am paying £16,000 a year for my course because I'm an international student. Every child in the world should have the right to education and I don't understand why the price is so high. I am lucky that my parents can sacrifice this for me, but so many families cannot afford it.

"It's all about money and profit. That is very wrong because education is not a place to make money. Education is a fundamental right for every human being. When it comes to education, health and housing, you can't make that a business!"

Staff also struck at University of Southampton. Student nurses signed a petition in support of the lecturers and academic staff. One explained, "It is

disgraceful. When we want to have a pension, there won't be one. Pensions should be totally protected. They are systematically dismantling the health service."

Another student nurse said, "They are going after the public services because they are an easy target. They go after the people who are paid by the state unless they fight back."

Dozens of students took part in the picket lines in solidarity with lecturers. Dan, who studies at the Language Faculty, said, "This is part of a wider attack on the education system. The number of lecturers has been cut and their wages have been cut even further. This is having an impact on students and is going to have an impact on the wider community and the working class."

Ivan Walton, an IT worker, said, "They are gutting our pay and now they are coming for our pensions. This can be the last straw for a lot of people. Why should I work in the university sector in the UK? The way university management seems to think these days is that we are units of production and we are the costs they need to reduce."

Jonathan works in the medicine department. He said, "There is a review in the university. I believe they are going to merge the faculties—from eight to five—and some departments. People are potentially losing their jobs and having their pensions put at risk at a time when senior management are being given quite high salaries."

"What is happening in the universities is slightly different to what happened to junior doctors. Nonetheless, it is part of an increased marketization of public services and gradual erosion of rights and benefits of workers. It is part of a wider dismantling of public services."

Professor Vincent O'Connor has been working in the school of biological sciences for more than 16 years. He said, "We are dedicated to our research and teaching and came into the profession with the expectation of a half decent pension when we retired. There have been 15 years of change in higher education and tertiary education. There is a wider undercurrent going on."

"Look at the news last week where government suggested that students were paying too much money for their education and they weren't getting value for

money. My experience is that students are being taught by experts with 10,000 hours of expertise, who are dedicated, who aren't driven by monetary gain but want to educate and to do excellent research.

"British universities are a beacon, with a culture of 450-500 years of excellence, of insight and of contribution which is now being undone."

Isobel Stark is a librarian. She explained, "Our pension scheme is being changed from a defined benefit scheme to a defined contribution scheme. We have already moved to career average from final salary pension and this is another way of employers trying to cut our pensions."

"Some universities started to think of themselves more as businesses and the government is treating them as businesses. I have been a member of this scheme for 23 years. Academics' salaries have been consistently falling behind equivalent salaries since the 1970s. We are not well-off people."

"We have some very low-paid staff at the university. We have far too many people in zero-hour contracts and short-term contracts. Introducing tuition fees and removal of maintenance grants was disastrous for bright working class kids. They are all part and parcel of turning universities into businesses, which we are not."



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