UK Universities step up job cuts with connivance of the University and College Union

Ioan Petrescu
15 November 2020

The University and College Union (UCU) is working in partnership with college and university management in enforcing job losses and attacks on terms, conditions and pensions.

Last Monday, the UCU finalised a sell-out agreement in its dispute with Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, just one day before strike action was to commence.

The strike was called in opposition to more than 100 threatened compulsory redundancies. Staff voted for strike action by a 77 percent majority, on a 66 percent turnout. The union called off the walkouts after management promised they would not impose *compulsory*redundancies. For the UCU, sanctioning the strike was only ever a PR exercise as they had already reached an agreement with the employers in early August to open a "voluntary" redundancy programme.

While the UCU and its various pseudo-left appendages have attempted to pass this off as a victory for workers, it is nothing of the sort. In the press release calling off action, the UCU said that the dispute was over "Following the progress made via this voluntary process". Contrary to the claims of UCU, no jobs are being saved. Rather, the university is to achieve its desired cuts through the voluntary scheme and does not require the use of compulsory redundancies for the time being. The only "concession" extracted from the university is a worthless promise not to impose compulsory redundancies at this juncture.

Hundreds of redundancies are being enforced at institutions nationwide.

• The University of East London plans another 10 staff redundancies, including seven academic posts and has put 441 in an "at-risk" category, even though it had achieved its financial targets for the year. This is in addition to 82 "voluntary" redundancies already cut this year with the connivance of the UCU. UEL plans 132 job losses in total

• Up to 200 jobs are at risk at Bangor University after "an anticipated fall in income, mainly related to international student recruitment". 120 support staff and 80 academic jobs could go. It is the third round of job cuts in three years. All three unions representing staff (Unison, Unite and UCU) have issued criticisms but no action is planned to fight the attacks.

• Job cuts loom as the University of Leicester sets out plans to cut funds for certain subjects. The university declined to say how many posts are at risk but in a letter to staff it said, "[W]e need to make some difficult decisions by disinvesting in certain areas of the university to sustain our areas of excellence and take advantage of emerging areas in research and education." The impacted areas are: School of Arts; Business; Informatics; Mathematics and Actuarial Science; Neuroscience, Psychology and Behaviour. The local UCU branch has said that it was "staggered" and "angered" about the timing of the cuts, though not about the necessity for cuts in the first place.

• The University of Central Lancashire is threatening the loss of 69 jobs by next March. UCU regional official Martyn Moss said, "The University of Central Lancashire has already released 240 staff through voluntary redundancies over the past 16 months, whilst student numbers have increased." He said the UCU is open to negotiation, "but the threat to our members' jobs must be lifted before meaningful dialogue can take place."

• Cuts are also planned at three colleges at Cambridge University colleges, Downing, Queens, and Trinity

• Solent University, Southampton has confirmed that 109 positions are at risk. It recently opened a voluntary redundancy scheme as the preferred method to eliminate positions.

These redundancies are made in the context of lecturers being forced to take on more workload, because they must prepare material for both face-to-face and online learning in parallel.

In these struggles, the UCU plays a pernicious role in dividing workers at different institutions and directing their

© World Socialist Web Site

militancy toward useless appeals to management centred on convincing them that job losses can be better organised on a "voluntary" basis. In this it continues its demobilisation of all struggles epitomised by its utilising the pretext of the COVID-19 lockdown in March to end the largest strike of university staff in history at 74 institutions.

In June, the UCU Solidarity Movement, a new formation within the UCU, was set up by personnel in a few local branches with the declared aim of pressuring the UCU leadership. Among its demands were "To designate every branch industrial dispute as having national significance, and provide it with the appropriate resources, including organising solidarity across the union." It intervened in the dispute at Heriot Watt, including by organising a "day of action" on November 10 day—the strike was set to go ahead—and setting up a GoFundMe for members to donate money for their strike fund. It never offered an explanation as to why a union bringing in over £22 million a year from members' dues should have to donate to strike funds.

UCU Solidarity is backed by various pseudo-left forces and received support from John McDonnell—Jeremy Corbyn's closest ally when he led the Labour party. The UCU Left, a grouping within the union politically led by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), endorses UCU Solidarity. UCU Left is a well-established part of the UCU hierarchy, having four seats on the National Executive Committee of the union. Among the SWP's leading bureaucrats is UCU Scotland President Carlo Morelli.

Highlighting its upper-middle class character, at last month's UCU congress, the UCU Left supported no less than 15 motions relating to racial and identity politics, including one explicitly supporting the anti-democratic #metoo movement.

In recent weeks, as more and more workers are beginning to recognise the bankruptcy of the UCU, the UCU Left has responded by adopting a more critical tone towards the UCU. As term began, the UCU Left criticised the "Jobs First" strategy of the UCU leadership as a "dangerous strategy", on the basis that it is premised on sacrificing pay and conditions for promises--that are inevitably broken--from the employer of not eliminating jobs.

The UCU Left couches its criticism in the politest terms, while failing to mention that, due to its members holding important positions in the union's bureaucracy--including in negotiating committees--they are directly implicated in the attacks on jobs, pay and conditions. The timing of the article, in the wake of the betrayals of the pensions dispute and the "Four Fights", and ahead of a rash of cuts by management makes clear that the main concern of UCU Left is the exposure of its own negotiators as they impose cuts and job losses.

The UCU Left's perspective was articulated in an article by SWP member Sean Vernell, a member of UCU's National Executive Committee. In it, he complains that universities are being kept open during the second lockdown--a recognition of growing anger among UCU staff whose safety and lives are being threatened.

Last week, the UCU launched a consultative ballot at the University of Birmingham (UoB) over the forced return to on-campus teaching and working. The UoB has the greatest number of COVID-19 infections among staff, 23, of any institution.

However, Vernell urges workers who want to fight to remain shackled by the government's anti-strike and anti-worker laws and attempt to "beat the government's balloting thresholds and secure legal requirements to resist." He gives an approving nod to the UCU's "escalation strategy" regarding Covid infections on campus—a convoluted 12 stage process involving "advising members on an individual basis" sending template letters, holding an emergency meeting, then sending more letters, towards eventually hold a local industrial action ballot--under conditions in which tens of thousands of students have COVID-19, along with hundreds of staff. Vernell's afterthought, "But we *may* have to move more quickly to protect lives", sums up the UCU Left. (emphasis added).

The UCU, as with all unions, operate as adjuncts of management to supress all opposition by workers to attacks on their jobs and livelihoods.

University workers want to fight back against the reckless and homicidal response to the pandemic allowed to spread by Boris Johnson's government and facilitated by the education unions. This fight cannot be waged via the UCU apparatus, or through any of its pseudo-left appendages, such as the UCU Left/UCU Solidarity. The way forward is through the organisation of rank-and-file safety committees at all universities, uniting workers with students to oppose and close down unsafe campuses until they can be made safe. We encourage university workers and students to join the Educators-Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site