

UK universities step up jobs cull in collaboration with the trade unions

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As the COVID-19 pandemic worsened last March, the University and College Union (UCU) fell in line behind the government and employers' insistence that "we are all in it together".

Its negotiators in the pensions and pay dispute, the largest UK university strike in history, put an offer on the table which they admitted "fall[s] short of our original demands" and pledged, "[w]e won't escalate our disputes during the pandemic—but we won't abandon them either".

This spirit of generosity was not shared by the universities, who announced plans to make compulsory redundancies, or opened "voluntary" redundancy schemes with the blessing of the UCU, citing projections that income from the inflated fees paid by international students would fall due to deferred or declined offers.

This expected fall failed to materialise, with UCAS figures released in September revealing that the number of students from outside the UK and EU starting a course in 2020 increased 9 percent on the previous year. However, between March and September, over 3,000 university staff were made redundant, according to information obtained by Edvoy.

Even without the excuse of a fall in student numbers, university management continue to use the room to manoeuvre provided by the UCU to force through job losses and restructuring plans, in some cases after previous attempts had failed due to staff and student opposition. These major attacks mirror the mass job losses in the higher education sector which followed the 2008 financial crash, and the response of the UCU has been identical. It is happy for jobs to be lost, as long as it can contain the anger of workers by "negotiating" slightly improved terms and maintaining its position at management's side.

Last November, the WSWs reported on the hundreds of redundancies being planned at the universities across the UK. The response of the UCU to the attack on jobs, and the continued reopening of campuses during the pandemic, with many university staff classified as "critical workers", has been to isolate each dispute and oppose calls for unified national action.

The pattern for the UCU's betrayals was the dispute at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, which was called off on the basis of a management commitment to make no compulsory redundancies. This was hailed by UCU Scotland President and Socialist Workers Party member Carlo Morelli as a "magnificent victory"—even as the *Socialist Worker* admitted "many workers at the university have come forward to take voluntary redundancy".

At the University of East London (UEL), where 441 staff have been notified they may be made redundant, 92 staff have already been affected by the restructuring, according to the *Guardian*. The majority of these are "voluntary".

After receiving a mandate from members in December to strike, the UCU responded merely by calling on them to work to contract. The chair and vice-chair of the UEL branch of UCU are among the compulsory redundancies, but while the UCU has described this as victimisation it refused to call a stoppage in response.

Goldsmiths University of London has brought forward a new restructuring plan, attempting to cut £6 million from its budget, after an earlier one was defeated by student and staff opposition last year. Goldsmiths UCU branch responded by calling for members to work to contract and boycott the assessment of coursework, demanding the university commit to "no compulsory redundancies for the next 2 years".

University management responded to this assessment boycott by threatening to deny furlough requests from anyone taking part. Against this attempt to victimise those participating in industrial action, the UCU has not escalated their response, but instead launched a petition on the basis that the university's victimisation "discriminates against women trade unionists particularly".

That the UCU has made such pathetic token gestures to defend its own members against victimisation and intimidation by university management demonstrates that it does not intend to wage a serious struggle against job cuts. In every dispute, the UCU reveals its character as a tool of the universities in managing and containing workers' anger, while imposing the cuts demanded.

A motion put to the members of the UCU branch at Senate House University of London is explicit about the attitude of the union towards redundancies: "The current VR [voluntary redundancies] offering is not the best the University can afford, and offering more favourable terms would, likely, avoid the need for compulsory redundancies through change management processes." That is, the UCU will wage no struggle against job cuts, as long as the university provides them with slightly better redundancy terms with which they hope to placate their membership.

In response to the plan for 200 job losses announced by Bangor University in October, the only response of the UCU has been to work out, together with the other two university trade unions, UNISON and Unite, an "amazing counterproposal" of "collective pay sacrifice". This would be in return for a commitment to make

no compulsory redundancies and to give the unions seats on the University Council. If this further integration into management is granted, the unions will use their position to impose yet more pay cuts and “voluntary” redundancies.

The University of Leicester has told 145 staff they may be made redundant and announced plans to “disinvest” in certain areas to focus on the “areas of excellence” which bring in more income—on the basis of a report from external private consultants which has not been published. The plans to make research staff redundant in the Department of Neuroscience, Psychology and Behaviour and to completely eliminate research in pure mathematics were condemned by the UCU, which pointed out that the university had put itself in a dire financial condition prior to the pandemic, having spent large amounts of money on capital investments and become reliant on private finance. The UCU did nothing to oppose the 162 redundancies made by the university during the first wave of the pandemic.

Many of the redundancies planned nationally target areas of research which are vital to help combat the pandemic. The University of Liverpool has announced 47 redundancies in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, and the University of Leeds is seeking voluntary redundancies in both the School of Medicine and the Faculty of Biological Sciences.

The University of Dundee has announced restructuring plans in which it will merge several schools, cutting the equivalent of 34 full-time jobs. The UCU branch announced that if the university does not commit by February 5 to making no compulsory redundancies, they will organise a strike ballot.

Liverpool UCU members have voted to commit the branch to balloting for a strike, and the Leeds branch has “entered into dispute” with the university.

Given that the national UCU policy is to launch a “consultative” online ballot before any actual strike ballot, and that the declaring of a “dispute” inevitably leads to months of negotiations with management, many staff members will leave their jobs before any action is taken.

Events at the University of Brighton illustrate how the unions limit and isolate any industrial action even when their members do force a strike. The university announced a plan to centralise its IT service and notified 49 staff that they may be made redundant, with UNISON estimating 6-15 jobs will be lost. To oppose these changes, which will harm the IT provision in every department, the UCU called on all members to work to contract and arranged a mere five days of strikes in December. When the university did not respond, the UCU called five more for February.

The Brighton branch of UNISON voted overwhelmingly to join the strike in a consultative ballot, but the national union blocked the organisation of the follow-up statutory ballot.

Solent University in Southampton announced in November plans to cut 109 jobs, and said it would send dismissal letters before Christmas. The UCU’s use of a consultative ballot delayed any possible action until long after this point, with the postal ballot which gave a mandate for strike action closing January 20.

The UCU Left faction, under the influence of the Socialist Workers Party, works to provide the union with a “left” cover, advancing ever milder criticisms of every betrayal and spreading

the illusion that the leadership can be pushed to the left.

When the UCU committed last March not to escalate strike action in the face of escalating dangers for workers, the UCU Left blamed the members for this betrayal, writing “In these circumstances [of the pandemic], it is perhaps not surprising that many UCU members have put their feelings of anger about the direction of higher education on hold. There seem to be more important things to worry about in the short-term than pension contribution rates and pay inequalities.”

To give the illusion of united national action, even while branches were being practically isolated, the pseudo-left within the union bureaucracy set up the “UCU Solidarity Movement”, which has mostly organised online rallies and solicited donations to strike funds, while hailing every dispute as a sign of the UCU’s ability to fight. This continued even after the union bureaucracy charged a £10 levy to around 100,000 of its members to keep afloat a Fighting Fund to “support ... members who take strike action and face salary deductions from their employers.” This is despite the fact that the bureaucracy already coins in around £22 million in the dues income it receives annually.

No faction of the UCU bureaucracy opposes all redundancies in principle. Their record shows that they will do nothing of significance to protect jobs, pay and conditions and the safety of their members. The fight must be led by higher and further education workers through rank-and-file committees independent of the unions. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee urges workers to contact us about establishing a fighting and democratic committee on your campus to defeat the attacks on jobs and safety.



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