

UK universities and colleges escalate attacks on jobs and pay as Johnson government reopens unsafe campuses

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UK universities and colleges are taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to cut jobs and attack pay and conditions for teaching staff.

At least 12 universities are planning redundancies. At the University of Leicester 60 jobs are being cut, with 47 jobs being cut at the University of Liverpool and 34 jobs at the University of Dundee. Redundancies are expected at the University of Leeds, Newcastle University, the University of Central Lancashire, and Solent University and the University of London.

University administrations claim that job losses are required in order to remain financially sustainable and to deal with the fallout from the pandemic. At the University of Liverpool, 47 jobs are to go with management claiming it will “increase academic quality”. The reality is that the cuts are central to the marketisation and privatisation of the sector that has proceeded apace under the framework of the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act.

Dozens of jobs are to go due to the planned closure Newcastle University’s London campus. The campus opened just six years ago, with the university promising that staff recruited to work there would be part of a permanent workforce. The university is allowing only permanent higher education lecturers the option of relocating to the North East.

Redundancy announcements have sparked opposition from further and higher education staff. Strikes and industrial action ballots are in progress at a number of institutions.

Last week, University of Central Lancashire staff voted to strike to oppose job losses. Nearly four fifths of University and College Union (UCU) members (79 percent) agreed to back the strike, and 88 percent backed action short of a strike. In February, UCU members at Chichester College Group began balloting against plans

by the institution to axe 10 full-time equivalent jobs in maths and English—40 percent of that entire department. The college also intends to make more cuts by reducing in-person teaching permanently.

Jo Grady, the General Secretary of the UCUC, said of the raft of planned job losses: “it is absolutely contemptible for some universities to exploit the pandemic by threatening to make staff redundant”.

It is only due to the UCU’s collaboration with university and college management that these attacks are able to be enforced.

Events at Solent University reveal the role of the UCU as a reliable partner of management. The university announced November 2 its intention to make 219 staff redundant. The union dragged its feet for three months by calling a “consultative ballot”, held from November 26-December 6, for strike action. Only then did they hold an actual strike ballot, held over January 6-January 20. Both returned overwhelming yes votes, one showing 94 percent in favour.

Instead of launching a strike, the union entered negotiations with the university and came back with a deal on February 15 delivering none of the workers’ demands. The union sought to obtain a “promise” from the university to make no compulsory redundancies, only “voluntary” ones. Management refused to offer even this concession. The deal allows the university to progress with a number of dismissals already in progress and merely postpones the rest until 2022.

In addition, and what the UCU was really after, the agreement provides for “disclosure of information to recognised trade unions in any future restructure or redundancy situation, including financial information”—thus ensuring that the union bureaucracy maintains its cosy relationship with management in order

to be able to sell job losses and other cuts to its members more effectively.

Staff began a strike on February 22 at the University of East London (UEL) in response to the sacking of four members of staff. As opposed to other disputes, the UCU felt it necessary to allow action to go ahead due to a particularly intransigent management, which refused even to enter negotiations mediated by the pro-employer Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). Two of the staff targeted are the UCU branch chair and UCU vice-chair. The union is trying to paint the dispute as an attack on female black and minority ethnic staff, thus undercutting the class unity of members facing the same attacks on their jobs as thousands of others across the education sector and millions in other sectors nationally.

Goldsmiths University in London plans £6 million in cuts, which could result in as many as 120 job cuts. Another 472 lecturers in temporary positions are in danger as the university reportedly plans on not renewing their contracts. In response, around 700 lecturers have started a “marking boycott,” refusing to mark any student work until management commits to no redundancies for at least two years. Such demands reveal the bankrupt role of the UCU, which will accept any “voluntary” redundancies at the drop of a hat.

Goldsmiths staff and students from the university have been holding a virtual picket during the last week. Supporters were urged to post an image or a video with a protest sign and tag it with #SaveGoldsmith. The picket garnered wide support from workers, reaching over two million people on social media.

The UCU nationally has mostly ignored the dispute, with no attempt to mobilise other branches in support and no information about the boycott on its website. Its only intervention has been to utilise identity politics to divide lecturers, by emphasizing that female and BAME staff will be most affected by the cuts, as they are more likely to be on temporary contracts.

Similar attacks are happening in Northern Ireland, where all further education colleges have agreed to offer lecturers a pay increase of just 7 percent spread over 4 years. The UCU noted, “Overall, the offer amounts to an annual pay rise of just 1.2% over a nine-year period and a real terms pay cut.” The union has declared a dispute with the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy, claiming that colleges cannot pay staff more unless Stormont increases funding. The UCU is threatening to ballot members for industrial action.

As part of reopening the economy, even at the cost of thousands of lives, Boris Johnson’s Conservative government reopened colleges campuses to millions of students in England aged 16-18 years old from Monday. This can only lead to a surge of new cases as the only “safety measures” in place are that college students will be asked to wear face coverings in classrooms and be tested weekly with rapid tests of dubious quality. Face coverings by themselves are not enough to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Universities can also reopen campuses for students who require practical teaching, specialist facilities or on-site assessments. The government will review plans for the return of all other students by the end of the Easter holidays.

Last autumn, the Tories recklessly reopened further and higher education, leading to at least 65,000 students and 8,000 staff being infected with coronavirus. The UCU sanctioned the reopening, making only a few criticisms of safety precautions at several universities.

The current reopening plans are predicated on using “lateral flow tests” to quickly test students and quarantine those testing positive. Latest evidence suggests that lateral flow tests only pick up around 60 percent of positive cases, and in some settings even fewer. This means that some people will be told they do not have coronavirus, when in fact they do, allowing them to continue to spread the virus to others. Experts have repeatedly raised concerns about the accuracy of the tests and warned that using them to manage outbreaks without isolating close contacts risks increasing the spread of the virus. Agreeing to let even a small number of students on campus in these conditions is nothing short of criminal.

To oppose the grave danger to their safety and that of students and to fight mass redundancies, university and college education workers, as well as students, must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the education unions. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is leading this struggle and urges staff and students 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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