

UK universities and colleges continue attacks on staff jobs and conditions

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Nearly 1,300 staff at the University of Liverpool are striking in protest against planned job cuts in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences. The three-week strike began on May 24, coinciding with the end of year examination period, and is set to have a considerable impact.

The university originally intended to cut up to 47 staff, but this was revised down to 32 after the University and College Union (UCU) threatened industrial action.

Announcing the reorganisation in February, Louise Kenny, Executive Pro Vice Chancellor of the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at the University of Liverpool, said, “Project SHAPE, which will bring about a major realignment of the University’s Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, was implemented in order to help tackle the extreme health inequalities and unmet health needs in the Liverpool City Region, both of which have been brought to the fore throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The Vice-Chancellor claimed the university needs the “headroom” provided by cutting jobs to have enough money to build a new research centre. But Liverpool University had a turnover of £584.7 million in 2020, as well as an operating surplus of £54.7 million. It has the seventh largest endowment of any university in England, at £168.3 million. Janet Beer, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liverpool receives an estimated £410,000 per year from the university. Louis Kenny recently boasted of selling a mansion in Ireland for €3.25 million.

The reality is that the job 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.

The UCU was reluctant to call the strike, waiting

more than a month and a half between the results of the ballot, backed by 84 percent of members, and the start of the action. It was forced to take action under immense pressure from the rank-and-file who want to defend their jobs and conditions.

In the last few weeks, the union has made clear that it is not opposed to redundancies in principle, only with the way the university goes about them. According to a union spokesman, its main objections are that the employer “relied on the use of flawed data to assess performance and was widely criticised by experts” and that “the criteria remain opaque, lack transparency and the university has refused to tell staff what data it is using to choose who to sack”. The UCU is a specialist in assisting universities to reduce staff numbers, provided this is done on a “voluntary” basis.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to a young staff member in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at a rally of striking staff. He explained how the cuts and restructuring at the university would have a detrimental impact, particularly on vital coronavirus research. “Some of the staff [who are being made redundant] have been doing research on COVID. We were known as the Institute of Integrative Biology. Part of the mission statement was a recognition that a lot of biology is increasingly an interdisciplinary subject. There is a lot of room for interdisciplinary research on coronavirus, and so one of the sad things about this whole restructure was the breakdown of that Institute, of that kind of idea that we all work on different things, but they have relationships to each other.

“One of the first things that struck me and struck a lot of people is the fact that they were doing this during a pandemic when people are so vulnerable.”

Asked about the government’s response to the pandemic, he said, “It seems wild what’s happened with

the herd immunity. It is all coming out in the [Dominic] Cummings hearing. It is just baffling, this kind of acceptance that people are going to die, and you know the various comments that we have heard about something like ‘bodies piling up’, seems completely inhuman to me. I suppose it is what can happen when you have a concentration of power among a few people.”

The faculty member expressed his concerns about the privatisation of higher education. “There’s an infiltration of private capital into public education,” he said. “There’s a building, just down the road, there’s an entire floor that’s owned by Unilever. It’s this sort of stuff that people have warned about for ages; that we spend all this public money on research, and then the profit is reaped by shareholders and people who are already very wealthy.” Asked about his opinion of the UCU, he explained, “I haven’t much historical knowledge, but they are not by the workers or for the workers.”

Attacks on jobs and conditions are happening at other universities around the UK. University College Birmingham is planning to axe 73 senior lecturer jobs and replace them with 42 new staff hired on cheaper contracts and increased workloads. The cuts would threaten teaching in the schools of business, tourism and creative industries, and health, sport and food. Many of the 73 staff threatened with the sack have been at the university for over 20 years.

The UCU has not called for any kind of industrial action against these attacks, instead complaining that the union has not been consulted and given the opportunity to sell the cuts to its membership before they were announced. UCU regional official Anne O’Sullivan said, “Proposals to cut 73 senior staff and create 42 new roles with non-negotiated changes to the pay and grading structure are a clear breach of the university’s legal obligations... We are calling on the university to meet with us to find a solution that protects jobs and student learning before it is forced to defend itself in court.”

Luminate Education (previously Leeds City College Group) has announced a restructuring plan that will see 39 jobs cut across multiple sites, including Leeds and Harrogate colleges. The proposals would affect adult and community learning and hair and beauty staff across Leeds, as well as business and learning support

staff at Harrogate College. Jobs in adult education will be cut at several sites in Leeds including at Mabgate, Beeston and Rothwell. Any new alternative posts created in the restructure will have reduced pay and changes to terms and conditions. The UCU is using identity politics to divide Luminate Education staff, with its main objection not being the cuts themselves, but rather that 90 percent of the positions affected are filled by women.

The role of the UCU in facilitating job losses is seen clearly at the University of Chester. The union posted a news piece on its website boasting that, “The university originally announced 86 redundancies, but negotiations with trade unions have led to a number of posts being saved.”

Emboldened, the university plans to cut 27 jobs in the English, humanities, history, archaeology, engineering, geography and media departments by July. There is strong opposition among staff and student, who have carried out joint protests. Over 150 staff attended the “biggest ever” UCU Chester branch meeting and voted by 96 percent “to pursue all means necessary to oppose all compulsory redundancies.” The union was sure to leave the door open to “voluntary” redundancies.

Every struggle university workers mount puts them at loggerheads with the corporatist trade unions. To fight mass redundancies, the ongoing marketisation of higher education and the continuing danger of COVID-19, university and college education workers must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the education unions and in alliance with students. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is leading this fight 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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