

University of Liverpool presses ahead with job cuts plan in collaboration with University and College Union

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The University of Liverpool intends to carry out redundancies in its Health and Life Sciences faculty, in opposition to staff in the department and wider university.

The university announced in January that 47 members of teaching and research staff in the faculty were due to be let go in May. It claims the cuts are needed to fund the building of a new research centre and, absurdly, to implement a new project to “tackle the extreme health inequalities and unmet health needs in the Liverpool City Region”.

But the latest financial breakdown shows the university spent under £12 million on staff in the faculty of health and life sciences in 2019/20, when the university's total income was over £583 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. Louise Kenny, the Vice-Chancellor of the faculty of health and life sciences, recently boasted of her moves to sell a mansion in Ireland for €3.25 million.

After months of protests from staff at the university, the number of redundancies was reduced to 24. That the university was not forced to take the cuts completely off the table was due to the role played by the University and College Union (UCU).

In response to the cuts, the UCU dragged their members through the usual torturous process of having first a “consultative” ballot and only after that an actual strike ballot. This was aimed at discouraging workers and delaying any strike action the union might have to sanction for as long as possible. Even so, the ballot returned a clear mandate, with 84 percent of members voting to strike. The UCU continued to delay calling any action, waiting more than a month and a half between the

results of the ballot and the start of the strike.

At the beginning of the strike the UCU made clear that it was not opposed to redundancies in principle, only with the way the university went about them. The union specialises in assisting universities to reduce staff numbers, provided this is done on a “voluntary” basis. According to a UCU spokesman, its main objections were that the employer “relied on the use of flawed data to assess performance” 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 strike, involving 1,300 members of staff, started on May 24 and coincided with the end-of-year examination period, having a considerable impact on the university. However, the UCU refused to call out its members at other universities in support or make any attempt to broaden the strike in any way. In the end, the union called off the strike after three weeks, on the basis that management had reduced the number of job losses from 47 to 24.

A week after the strike ended, as management refused to accept the UCU’s demand that the job losses be taken off the table as the basis for further negotiations, and as pressure was increasing again on the union from the rank-and-file to defend their colleagues, the UCU called for a marking and assessment boycott until the end of term. It insisted that staff perform all other duties.

The university retaliated immediately by telling staff it would withhold 100 percent of their wages until they completed marking all assessments affected by the industrial action.

In response to this ruthless attack on its members, the UCU appealed to management’s better nature. General Secretary Jo Grady said, “Withholding all pay from staff who are willing to perform the majority of their duties is

disgraceful and tantamount to a lock-out by university managers. We have never seen a university behave so egregiously. It is not the sort of behaviour you expect to see from any employer, let alone an institution that claims to be a proud asset of a great city like Liverpool.”

At no point did the UCU call on staff to stop working until they were paid or organise a strike ballot over the issue.

The university also sent an email to students claiming that the results of their exams and dissertations would not be delayed by the boycott. This raised concerns among students that the university would have people grade papers who were not subject specialists, including postgraduate students. The Liverpool Guild of Students launched a petition in protest which was signed by about 300 students. The Guild itself has lent support to the UCU, also appealing to the university to “reconsider” the redundancies in the health and life sciences department.

Student support for the teaching and research staff manifested itself on June 24 when hundreds of students protested in University Square against the planned job cuts. Olly Wicks, a student in the final year of his degree, told the *Liverpool Echo*: “Obviously it’s frustrating not to get the dissertation back, but I completely support the strike. And if the marking boycott and my dissertation getting back slower is what it takes to for the university to learn that it needs to get its act together, then I’m happy to be part of that process.”

On July 5, when students were meant to receive their grades, it became clear that entire courses would not receive the results for this academic year until the following week at the earliest. Many students were also told they had failed some modules on the university’s results portal. In total, approximately 1,500 students were affected.

In response to this debacle, the UCU organised another ineffective action, calling for a “global boycott” of the University of Liverpool. The union has asked its members, other trade unions, and the international academic community to:

- not apply for any advertised jobs at Liverpool
- not agree to speak at or organise academic or other conferences at Liverpool which are outside of contract.
- not accept new invitations to give lectures at Liverpool.
- not accept new positions as visiting professors or researchers at Liverpool
- not accept invitations outside of contract to write for any academic journal which is edited at or produced by

Liverpool.

- not accept new contracts as external examiners for taught courses at Liverpool

These actions that will have only a minimal impact on the university, and even that impact will not be immediate, allowing management to wait it out. Grady used it as a platform to reiterate her corporatist appeal to the university leadership, saying that “It is very simple for university managers to end this dispute, they need to meet with us and work with us to save jobs and protect academic standards.”

Management now seems to be warming to the idea of collaborating with the UCU to enforce its agenda. On July 12 they shifted their position and announced the suspension of 100 percent pay deductions for a fortnight to allow for new discussions with the union to “de-escalate the boycott.”

Whatever deal is agreed will be at the expense of UCU’s members. 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. Last year universities in the UK made 3,000 redundancies—according to Freedom of Information requests by the educational platform Edvoy—with the acquiescence of the UCU and the other education unions. The University of Sheffield recorded 424 redundancies and the University of Manchester carried out 528. At Liverpool, in the same period, 536 fixed-term contracts expired and most of them were not renewed.

Every struggle university workers mount puts them at loggerheads with the corporatist unions and their strategies for defeat. 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.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact