

UCU Left aids union sabotage of fight at the University of Liverpool

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On Monday, staff at the University of Liverpool returned to work after two weeks of strikes. It is the second strike by around 1,300 members of the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences called by the University and College Union (UCU) after the university announced 47 planned redundancies in January.

The Faculty of Health and Life Sciences carries out important research in areas such as health inequality, with its Institute of Population Health taking part in many local projects, including a major new study into Long COVID. The faculty has over 1,850 staff, 5,000 undergraduates and 1,000 postgraduate students.

The university has absurdly claimed that in order to free up resources to invest in the health sciences, it has to first make cuts to the health sciences! Its job cuts are part of the university's Project SHAPE restructuring of the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, which it claimed was "implemented in order to help tackle the extreme health inequalities and unmet health needs in the Liverpool City Region."

In reality, the plan is yet another cost cutting measure to "compete" in the marketised higher education system. The proposal for Project SHAPE, obtained by Freedom of Information campaigner Julian Todd, alludes to "societal benefit and health outcomes" but these are not mentioned. Higher on the list are increased student recruitment and "[i]ncreased financial stability, creating headroom for re-investment in emerging strategic priorities, and ongoing investment in facilities."

The proposal makes clear the reforms are intended to implement cuts to strengthen the university's finances and league table position, not improve health services. The success of the restructure would "make a substantial contribution to fulfilling the aims of Strategy 2026, including a top 100 world ranking for the University". Strategy 2026 commits to "generating an annual surplus of at least 4% by 2026, while maintaining a minimum holding of £60m in cash".

These plans will cause enormous damage to health

services for the most vulnerable. The *Liverpool Echo* interviewed an academic targeted for redundancy, Dr Luna Centifani, a clinical psychologist working in North Birkenhead—one of the most deprived areas in the UK.

Dr Centifani said that the plans were "not going to lead to a better research environment, [or] a better teaching environment." The cuts also undermine the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences plays an important role in the "Liverpool STOP COVID" group.

These attacks expose the Johnson government's lie that it is committed to scientific education. In launching philistine attacks on the arts and humanities as "dead-end courses", Education Secretary Gavin Williamson claimed the government aimed to "create the valuable and technical courses our society needs."

The attempts of the Tories to play off one section of academics against another is merely a cover for planned attacks on education and research all down the line. The government has no interest in promoting health research which would reveal the devastating impact of its austerity policies and its homicidal herd immunity response to the pandemic, and it enforces the competitive market mechanisms driving cuts in all areas of education.

An Office for Students was founded in 2018 to promote university "competition", and *Times Higher Education* recently reported that figures within the Department for Education are considering cuts in tuition fees. To pay for this, universities will pursue even more aggressive student recruitment strategies, pushing up class sizes.

As it has done in many disputes, the UCU has called only for *compulsory* redundancies to be withdrawn. While the number of planned compulsory redundancies has been reduced from 47 to 2 since the first strikes in May, neither the UCU nor the university has announced how many workers have been pressured into accepting "voluntary" redundancy or early retirement.

Throughout the dispute at Liverpool, the UCU has worked to limit and isolate its members. The union insisted on an

unnecessary “consultative” ballot before it would arrange a strike ballot, and then waited over a month after the second ballot closed before calling any strike action.

The union did everything it could to undermine the marking boycott begun in June. It agreed with the university’s demand that marking be prioritised before the boycott to minimise its impact. Once the university announced it would deduct 100 percent of the wages of anyone taking part in the boycott, the UCU publicly condemned it, but did nothing to escalate the industrial action. In fact, it quickly reached an agreement with the university to call off the boycott within three weeks of results day.

The UCU reports that the local strike fund has increased by over 500 percent since the first strike in May due to an influx of donations. However, the union has responded to this show of mass support by calling for more donations, rather than calling out other members in a common struggle. The “UCU Solidarity Movement”, a mouthpiece for elements of the union leadership, shamelessly wrote “if we all gave £10 a week the branch would easily win.”

The only joint action the UCU has arranged is a “global boycott” of the University of Liverpool, supposedly the union’s “ultimate sanction”. This ineffectual measure, calling on academics elsewhere to refuse to apply for jobs, attend events or collaborate with research projects at the university, serves only to isolate staff from their colleagues in the UK and internationally. It has had so little impact that the university has not mentioned it once in its response to the dispute. An identical boycott did not prevent job cuts at the University of Leicester, where the UCU agreed last week to 21 redundancies.

The treacherous role played by the UCU has been systematically covered up by the pseudo-left press.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) leads the UCU Left faction, which holds many leading positions in the union. UCU Left has made absolutely no criticism of the union’s policy of only opposing compulsory redundancies, and it has said not a word about the isolation of the Liverpool dispute.

While it advances mealy-mouthed criticisms of the UCU’s delaying tactics, the UCU Left claims that the union can be reformed by pressure from below. The current president of the Liverpool branch of the UCU is Anthony O’Hanlon. He was promoted by the UCU Left in the 2019 executive elections as a supposed reformer but has presided over the same policies as any other UCU official.

The SWP itself has published mainly uncritical interviews and articles written by local UCU officials. The closest any of the pseudo-left groups have come to criticising the UCU’s tactics was an article in the *Socialist Worker* in May arguing that the strikers should be picketing the campus.

Even this has been mostly ignored. When WSWS reporters visited the location of an announced picket line on the final day of the strike last week, it had ended within 45 minutes, after a brief photo opportunity.

The UCU has also been endorsed by the centre of gravity of the British pseudo-left, former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Speaking at a rally in Liverpool on August 9 alongside the UCU General Secretary and branch president, the head of the Liverpool Guild of Students, numerous Labour MPs and the founder of Merseyside Black Lives Matter, Corbyn told the large crowd that the UCU would “not stop until every job has been saved” and claimed that it would also “stop the university going after the cleaners, the catering workers, the contractors and all the other workers in the university.”

The record of the UCU and other campus trade unions throughout the pandemic reveals the opposite: the universities went after thousands of workers while the unions refused to lift a finger. Figures obtained by education platform Edvoy reveal that from May to September 2020, universities made over 3,000 redundancies, which the UCU failed to oppose. At Liverpool, in the same period, 536 fixed-term contracts expired and most of them were not renewed.

The cancellation of most compulsory redundancies at Liverpool shows that the university has warmed to the UCU’s suggestion it can make huge staffing cuts through “voluntary” redundancies, as countless other universities have. A campaign to defend all jobs in the university sector requires a socialist strategy directed against the marketised system itself. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is founded on this basis and will fight to unify the struggles of all workers in higher education and the working class more broadly. Contact the committee to join the fight!



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