

UK: Richmond upon Thames College tutors oppose management's "fire and rehire" attack

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Staff at Richmond upon Thames College in southwest London are set to strike for five consecutive days over plans to sack every tutor at the college and force them to reapply for their jobs on inferior terms and conditions. The action by University and College Union (UCU) members is set to take place from May 23.

The Further Education (FE) college teaches approximately 3,650 A-level and adult education students per academic year. The college wants to dismiss 127 teaching staff who must then accept new contracts forfeiting 10 days holiday per year. Tutors' holiday entitlement is threatened by a college that pays qualified tutors a meagre £26,000—the average British salary is currently approximately £29,600.

Pay at the college is considerably lower than other colleges in the London and Greater London area. Teachers at local schools can, according to the southwest London local press, earn twice as much.

College management started staff consultation on March 8 and extended the 45-day negotiation period by 18 days. But the UCU was unable to extract any concessions it could sell to its membership. On May 10 management began meeting staff members individually before issuing dismissal notices. The college confirmed it would enter no further negotiations with the union.

The UCU told management they must withdraw the axe hanging over the heads of tutors in the form of compulsory dismissals and detrimental changes to contractual terms and conditions. But management feel emboldened to push through with their attack. The UCU leadership has a history of surrendering to the demands of the employers, most recently in their capitulation to savage attacks on lecturers' pay, terms

and conditions in Higher Education.

UCU General Secretary Jo Grady stated on May 11, "The management team at Richmond upon Thames are effectively putting a gun to the head of their own staff. It is deplorable behaviour and it will be met with the full force of our union. The huge vote for strike action shows staff are going absolutely nowhere and it is in the interests of all that the so-called leaders of the college think again and immediately remove the threat on people's jobs."

College management will not lose any sleep on hearing these words. The UCU is confining action to a five-day stoppage at the college, with a work to rule afterwards. No action is being taken by the UCU to rally support at other FE colleges across London or nationally who are under attack from massive funding cutbacks.

College management began the "fire and rehire" process, described as "termination and re-engagement", without even bothering to consult staff first. The term has a military ring to it, expressing the class war agenda of the employers. But the unions are responding everywhere by suppressing industrial action or else confining strikes to local skirmishes as a prelude to defeat.

Staff are determined to defeat management's provocative actions. A massive 97 percent of UCU members at the college voted to strike in a turnout of 88 percent. Support for action short of a strike was 100 percent.

Five days of strike action will be followed by staff working to contract. Action short of a strike may include refusing to cover for colleagues, refusing to use personal IT facilities (including Wi-Fi and broadband),

refusing to reschedule classes cancelled due to strike action, and a boycott of assessments.

Richmond upon Thames college bosses are joining British Airways, British Gas, Weetabix, Go North West, Tesco and Jacobs Douwe Egberts and others, who have all used “fire and rehire” measures against their workforce. In each case the unions have facilitated company demands to slash conditions and pay. Since March 2020, almost 10 percent of workers in the UK have been required to reapply for their jobs on worse terms and conditions.

“Fire and rehire” is not a new phenomenon. Companies have long had the legal right to serve notice of termination for an existing employment contract while simultaneously offering a new contract with inferior pay, terms and conditions. But since the start of the pandemic, employers have turned to this savage measure more regularly to discipline workers and ramp up exploitation.

Workers face a brutal choice: accept worse terms or find alternative employment. Surging inflation will be used to further this agenda. Conservative MP Rachel McClean recently suggested that workers unable to make ends meet should be “taking on more hours or moving to a better paid job”.

One Fleet Street wag suggested that perhaps workers should retrain as investment bankers. McClean previously worked for HSBC bank, before setting up an IT company with her husband that posted £1.8 million of operating profits in 2020, up 45 percent on the year before. As an MP she claims almost as much in expenses to cover her London rent (£24,000) as Richmond upon Thames tutors earn in a year.

Employees with at least two years’ service can claim unfair dismissal if they choose to reject new inferior contracts, but the odds against winning are weighty and the disincentives legion. The bosses have long established legal precedents against charges of unfair dismissal arising from “fire and rehire” policies. Employment Tribunals frequently rule on the side of bosses, with employment law grounded in the defence of private property.

There is a massive backlog of unfair dismissal cases leaving untold numbers of victimised workers with hearing dates anywhere up to 24 months away. The average award for an unfair dismissal claim in 2019-2020 was just £10,812 and the median award just

£6,646. Of the 14 percent of claims that go to a hearing, only half win. Reinstatement is hardly ever granted.

A coalition of trade unions responded to “fire and rehire” by promoting a cross-party alliance of the Labour Party, the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats to outlaw the practice. Just 46 Labour MPs out of 199 signed up to support an early day motion to legislate against the practice.

The unions’ campaign even appealed to Conservative government Prime Minister Boris Johnson, citing his grotesquely insincere remark that fire and rehire is “unacceptable as a negotiating tactic”. The Johnson government’s real attitude was summed up by Tory MP Paul Scully, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who declared it was acceptable as a last resort “at a time when businesses face acute challenges”.



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