

Planned strike at University of Sheffield International College suspended by University and College Union

Our reporter
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Days before a strike was due to take place, on November 17 and 18, University and College Union (UCU) local reps at the University of Sheffield International College (USIC) suspended the planned action. The walkout, officially called off by the UCU on November 16, would have been the first at a private higher education provider in Britain.

Thirty minutes before the final USIC UCU branch meeting before the strike began, management at employer Study Group made a derisory last-minute offer of an additional 1 percent increase backdated to September 1, 2022, and a one-off payment of £300 for full-time staff earning beneath £25,000.

Members are being balloted on whether to accept or reject the offer between November 16 and November 23. If members vote to reject, then the remaining three days of planned strike action will begin November 28.

The 6 percent pay deal offered to those earning under £44,000, most of the workforce, and four percent for those whose salary exceeds £44,000, still constitutes an almost 6/7 percent pay cut this year and a 10 percent pay cut across the past 24 months. The £300 one-off payment will not go to the large numbers of teaching staff who exist on ever fluctuating zero hours contracts and are paid by the hour.

UCU reps said the offer by management represented a second improvement to their initial offer since the ballot for industrial action and the third improvement to the offer since the branch declared an official dispute.

The UCU demanded a pay increase of at least 12 percent, and management initially responded with a paltry 4 percent for the majority earning less than £44,000 and 2 percent for those earning above.

On the ballot, the UCU pay negotiators said they

believe Study Group can afford to pay more. The union made sure to declare, however, it was “mindful” that management were refusing to do so and that their offer is described as “final”. The ballot notes effectively said the union had reached the limit of what can be achieved.

UCU regional official said Julie Kelley stated that suspending “the strike action planned for this week” was a “gesture of goodwill” and “shows we are prepared to work towards an agreement but in the middle of a cost of living crisis it is clear that employers can do better.”

Teaching and office staff members at USIC voted last month to take five days of strike action during November 17-30 by almost 85 percent on an 83 percent turnout. Almost 98 percent voted to take action short of withdrawing their labour. Staff also backed a work to rule from November 21, which included working to their contracted hours, refusing to make up work lost as a result of strike action and refusing to cover for absent colleagues.

The number of workers prepared to strike has grown over the past year and delivered two overwhelming votes for action. USIC staff voted to initiate strike action back in February 2021 in response to Study Group’s offer of no pay rise; in a similar turnout of 86 percent of the branch membership with 79 percent voting to strike.

With RPI inflation rate running at 14.2 percent to October, the UCU’s pay claim is well below inflation. In addition to the three percent pay cut last year suffered by USIC workers, imposed with the collusion of the UCU despite an overwhelming vote to strike, management are seeking to cut their wages bill by

approximately 10 percent over 24 months.

Full-time lecturer starting salaries at the USIC are only approximately £32,000 for applicants frequently with doctorates. According to the Office for National Statistics, in 2021 the average UK salary was £38,131 for a full-time role and £13,549 for a part-time role. USIC office and auxiliary staff are typically recruited at full-time rates that hardly rise above the national minimum wage.

The UCU leadership is doing all it can to contain the dispute and bring it to a swift conclusion. There is no attempt to link up the struggles of educators, let alone with workers in other industries. Except for the final strike day on November 30, the dates for stoppages at USIC are separate from proposed national action being taken by UCU members at 150 British universities during November.

At no point have Study Group shown any sign of meeting the demands of the workforce. By drawing out negotiations Study Group gained weeks to organise a scab workforce to undermine any strike, including from frequently part-time workers at USIC and from the other Study Group colleges. The employer could potentially have classes delivered online and avoid pickets at the college. When English Language Training Centre staff employed directly by the University of Sheffield but located at the USIC went on strike, the Study Group brought in scab labour to undermine their strike.

More recently Drapers' Pyrgo Priory School in Romford, east London was among the first to use strike-busting legislation allowing them to hire agency workers to replace striking staff. School management shipped in scab labour to break the strike by 10 support staff protesting cuts to their wages and working hours.

USIC extensively uses the University of Sheffield coat of arms and Sheffield's international status as a world top 100 ranked university in promotional material.

The UCU appealed to the University of Sheffield to pressure Study Group but received short shrift. The union encouraged USIC staff and students to email the USIC college director and the Vice Chancellor of the University of Sheffield, Koen Lamberts. But the type of "leverage" strategy recommended by Unite union General Secretary Sharon Graham and others has had no impact whatsoever when universities have all been

squeezing their own workforces pay, conditions and pensions for years and are themselves facing action by their workforces.

Preparation courses at USIC can cost up to £22,000 per year per student. Accommodation and living costs easily double such expenditure. Study Group is contracted with over 50 universities, online and face-to-face, and is one of the biggest corporate providers of international education working with universities in the UK, Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.

Study Group can afford to pay a wage that maintains parity with inflation but is intent on nailing workers' wages to the floor. In their accounts up until December 31, 2020, Study Group Limited recorded profits after taxation and exceptional items in 2019 of £9.8 million.

According to research commissioned by the employers' body Universities UK (UUK) in 2021, 815,000 jobs across the economy depended, directly or indirectly, on universities. UCU-commissioned analysis in 2020 found that a third of workers said the local university was important to their own job, indicating the strategic role a fight by higher education workers could play.

Workers in higher education occupy an important position in the capitalist economy, and their unification outside the suffocation control of the trade union apparatus would contribute to the broader fightback against the intensified offensive on wages, pensions, terms and conditions.

This objective strength can be unleashed only by education workers creating rank-and-file committees independent of the trade unions. These committees will fight to mobilise education workers and students together in a struggle against the employers, public or private, right across the education sector.



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