University of Sheffield International College staff mount first strike at a UK private higher education provider

Our reporters
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Educators and office staff struck November 28, 29 and 30 for the first time at a fee-paying private higher education provider in the UK. University and College Union (UCU) members at the University of Sheffield International College (USIC) voted to reject an additional 1 percent pay rise for just four months made by their employer Study Group.

A total of five days of strike action by around 80 USIC workers was meant to start on November 17/18 following a ballot of UCU members in October which returned a mandate of 84 percent in favour after Study Group refused to make an offer above 5 percent. The revised offer was rejected in a vote returned last Friday, which was held after the union suspended the first two days of strike action. UCU Regional Officer Julie Kelley described the averting of strike action—called off just days before it was due to start—as a “gesture of goodwill”, stating merely that the employer “can do better”.

USIC is connected to the University of Sheffield and uses its coat of arms, providing preparation courses for overseas students. It is contracted with 50 universities to provide online and face-to-face learning and is one of the largest corporate providers of international education for universities in the UK, Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.

Striking USIC workers have refuted claims that their 12 percent pay demand is “unaffordable”. A homemade placard held up on the picket line this week highlighted massive pay increases to Study Group managers. The number of senior managers on salaries above £100,000 has almost trebled in the past years. Directors’ positions are advertised at salaries between £120,000 and £130,000. The starting rate for a full-time lecturer at USIC is approximately £32,000, well below the national average of £38,131, while office and support staff are recruited at full-time rates barely above the minimum wage.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to educators on the picket line who are demanding that the gap be reversed between low pay for staff and Study Group’s skyrocketing profits during the pandemic. Education staff connected their fight to the regressive impact of marketisation on higher education.

A full-time lecturer explained, “We are making history now. Last year we received a pay increase of just 3 percent that was not backdated. It covered just six months. We were told things would improve after the pandemic. Study Group made savings—they did not have the same costs of estate, for hiring facilities to teach because of the switch to online learning. There needs to be a fight against the level of casualisation. The ratio of those on permanent contracts to those without any secure employment is about 35 percent to 65 percent. I don’t want to accept that for my colleagues.”

A lecturer on a short-term contract added, “A lot of our contracts are very short, as short as three months, which of course keeps the staff flexible but means we are caught in a cycle constantly reapplying for jobs that we have already been doing and in my case moving around the country working at various universities.

“We are part of the university that is farmed out to Study Group. We are within the system but not a part of the system. We are private but legislated by the university. We are placed within a system where we have to mark assessments that are pedagogically flawed, and that is an open secret. But it is the market’s logical conclusion: If you inject market forces you are getting increasingly poorer education and the money is just being sucked out of the system.

“The students pay an awful lot of money for the courses, up to £22,000 a year. Private business is sucking money out.

"This is not just an industrial dispute. We've had a 25 percent real-terms pay cut since 2009, and we've had our pensions raided by 35 percent from 2020. It is an extraction of value which is completely unacceptable."

After staff rejected the revised offer, UCU branch chair Sam Morecroft stated, "Our members have made clear time and time again we are not going to accept significant real terms pay cut. We kept this college going during a pandemic, supporting and educating international students and now the value of our pay is collapsing. Study Group needs to understand that if they do not value their staff, they do not value anything about the college."

But UCU officials brought back management's "significant real terms pay cut" to justify suspending strike action. The miserly last-minute offer by Study Group of an additional 1 percent backdated to September 1, 2022, for just an additional four months, is coupled to a one-off payment of £300 for full-time staff earning beneath £25,000. It does not even cover the larger pool of casualised teaching staff.

Study Group's response to Morecroft's appeals and to Kelley's "good will gesture" has been a strike-breaking operation, with office staff drafted in from Brighton Study Group, 200 miles away, to assist with student enrolments. This confirms that a fight against the multinational company cannot be conducted on a localised basis.

The UCU has not announced any further strikes dates, and the work-to-rule from December 1 will not seriously impact assessment grading over Christmas and the New Year.

USIC workers have taken a critical step forward, but they face a fight on two fronts—against a ruthless employer and the UCU bureaucracy which is seeking to isolate and wear down their resistance.

The scheduled five-day strike at USIC only coincided with the final day of three days of stoppages by 70,000 UCU members at 150 higher education institutions over the past fortnight. UCU officials have based their "leverage" campaign on appeals to the University of Sheffield to intervene as an arbiter, not to the thousands of staff who walked out alongside those at Sheffield Hallam University as part of strike action against attacks on pay, pensions and casualisation.

Last week, English Language Training Centre employees of the University of Sheffield based at USIC took part in the national action on November 24 and 25. USIC branch members of the UCU were informed this was not their fight, dividing education workers at the two interconnected facilities who teach the same students.

The UCU's futile path at USIC mirrors the national "UCU Rising" campaign of corporate cooperation with management and the Conservative government. UCU General Secretary Jo Grady boasted this week that national strike action had succeeded in bringing employers "back in the room" but was silent on the content of the "enhanced offer" that has been made.

Grady spoke at a rally in London on Wednesday alongside union bureaucrats who are working to end national strike action. This includes Communication Workers Union (CWU) leader Dave Ward who has agreed which it is seeking to impose against 40,000 telecom workers at BT/Openreach. Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) leader Mick Lynch is in talks with the Conservative government to end the national rail dispute, having trumpeted as a victory at ScotRail and Transport for Wales.

USIC workers should take matters into their own hands and form a rank-and-file strike committee to reach out to Study Group workers across the country and internationally and forge direct ties with university workers. Casualisation is endemic across the university sector, with a third of staff on short-term contracts nationally. A genuine inflation busting pay claim should also be drawn up, defending academics and support staff from the cost-of-living crisis.

Decades of marketisation must be reversed based on the provision of public education as a fundamental social and democratic right. This demands a political struggle not just against the Tories but the pro-business and right-wing Labour Party. We urge USIC workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss a way forward.