

UK: University of Sheffield International College staff set to strike again

Our reporters
29 January 2023

Lecturers and office staff at a privately run higher education feeder institute connected to the University of Sheffield (UoS) are to strike for a second time over pay.

University of Sheffield International College (USIC) staff will take four days of strike action on January 30, 31 and February 2, 3. A work to rule continues since November 21 and a further five-day stoppage is planned to begin February 13.

Educators and office staff at USIC initially went on strike in November last year for three days—the first time the workforce have gone on strike at a fee-paying private higher education provider in the UK. University College Union (UCU) members had voted to reject a derisory four percent pay offer, plus an additional one percent for the four months of September-January 2022.

At a meeting with UCU branch officials on January 25, Study Group management issued a naked provocation to the workforce, returning to an earlier inferior offer. The reduced pay offer of four percent, on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, is the same miserable de facto pay cut that Study Group have imposed across their non-unionised UK colleges.

Management's intransigence feeds off the UCU leadership's business friendly, corporatist approach.

In a Twitter post dated January 21, the local UCU branch wrote, "We remain open to resolving the dispute [and] are continuing to meet with employer to discuss an improved offer."

Five days later, the branch Twitter lamented, "We met Study Group yesterday at ACAS, and indicated we were willing to reach a compromise. The employer refused to improve their offer for this year [2022], or to consider an offer for next year." It continued, "Shockingly, Study Group withdrew their previous

offer. This included a £300 one off payment for lowest paid support staff (earning less than FTE £25k)."

As with the previous strike, there are no calls for solidarity from UCU members in the wider University of Sheffield, or throughout the higher education sector—who are facing the same attacks on pay and conditions. The four day strike takes place on all days this week *except the February 1 Day of Action when hundreds of thousands of educators in schools and universities are striking*, along with train drivers and civil servants.

At every stage in the dispute, the UCU leadership has worked to minimise action after claiming its campaign has secured concessions.

In March 2022, the union called off eight days of planned strikes at USIC after reaching an agreement on a long-standing dispute over pay and holiday entitlements for 2021. The deal negotiated by the UCU involved a pay increase, backdated to September 2021, of 3 percent. This meant a real terms three percent pay cut but was dressed up as a "victory". It was even suggested to members that the employer committing themselves to commencing pay negotiations for 2022 as soon as possible with a starting figure of 3 percent was positive.

When negotiations over a pay deal for 2022 got nowhere, a total of five days of strike action by USIC workers was scheduled to start with a two-day stoppage on November 17, 18. This followed a strike ballot of UCU members in October which returned a mandate of 84 percent in favour after Study Group refused to make a revised pay offer above 5 percent.

Staff also backed a work to rule from November 21, which includes working to their contracted hours, refusing to make up work lost as a result of strike action and refusing to cover for absent colleagues.

But twenty-four hours before the first strike day, Study Group, in a blatant stalling exercise, offered an additional percentage point increase for four months. The union suspended the first two days of strike action in order to put this insulting offer to a vote, an act that UCU Regional Officer Julie Kelley described as a “gesture of goodwill”. Only once staff delivered another decisive ballot rejecting the company’s proposal did the strike get underway.

The original demand ratified by the UCU USIC membership for 2022 was for a 12 percent pay rise. But immediately after the first strike in November last year the union unilaterally retreated to a “reasonable and achievable” 9 percent—substantially below RPI inflation. UCU representatives said subsequently they would inform Study Group that they would recommend an offer of 8 percent to the membership.

Finally, before going back to arbitration service ACAS in January this year, the UCU offered Study Group a sellout deal of 8 percent this year and 2 percent next—in effect a 6 percent cut this year and, on current projections, another 5 percent the next.

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.

Its Sheffield operations depend on winning the contract tendered by the University of Sheffield (UoS). The USIC provides a route into UoS through preparation courses for overseas students, who enrol to improve their English, general study skills and subject specialism. Qualification courses can cost a single student as much as £22,000 per year.

The UCU has told members that only a “leverage” campaign—modelled on the corporatist agenda developed by Unite union leader Sharon Graham—of appealing to the University of Sheffield to pressure Study Group will be able to secure victory. The union encouraged staff and students to email the USIC college director and the Vice Chancellor of the University of Sheffield, Koen Lamberts.

None of this has had the slightest impact. Private education providers and ostensibly non-profit universities, which operate within a marketised system, pursue the same ruthless exploitation of their workforces. The UoS, as with all universities, is

engaged in a bitter dispute with lecturers over cuts to pay, conditions and pensions. On Wednesday 70,000 higher education workers will strike across the UK’s universities.

Study Group can afford more but are hellbent on nailing workers’ wages to the floor. The company recorded profits in 2019 after taxation and exceptional items of £9.8 million. The number of senior managers on salaries above £100,000 has almost trebled in recent years, while the starting rate for a full-time lecturer is approximately £32,000, well below the national average for the profession of £38,131. Office and support staff are recruited at full-time rates barely above the minimum wage.

USIC staff must draw the lessons of the dispute and the UCU’s failed campaign. The creation of a rank-and-file committee independent of the UCU would allow a free discussion on these issues and be the means to link up with and mobilise other education workers and students together in a struggle against the employers, public or private, right across the education sector.



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